

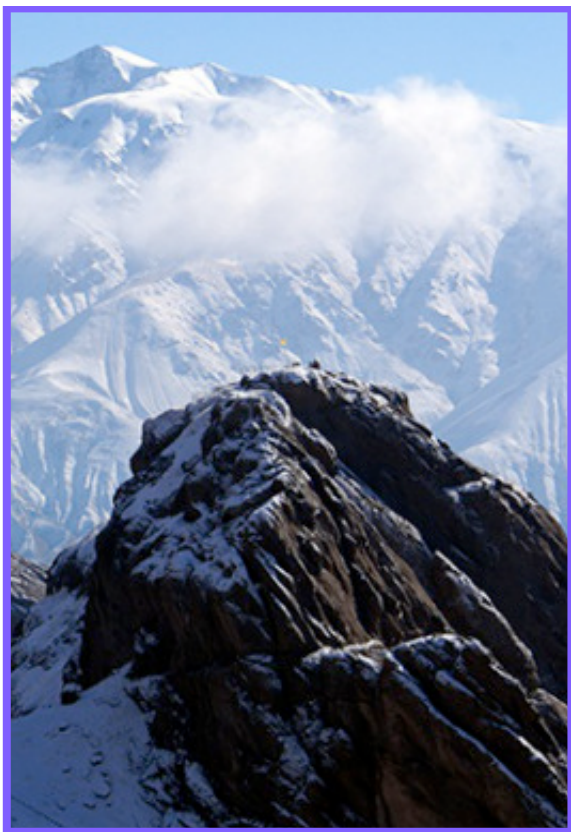
حسن الصبح



Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ



notes for a bayān given by:
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لَا أُقْسِمُ بِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ

lā ʾuqāsimu bi-yawmi-l-qiyāmah
 I swear by the Day of Resurrection
 (Sūratu-l-Qiyām 75:1))

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Who controls the past control the future.

Who controls the present controls the past.

(George Orwell: 1984)

I would suggest that anyone reading or listening to this Bayān go back and listen or read my Bayān on Naṣīr al-Kusrow رضى الله عنه to better understand the background before reading or listening to this. The reason for all of this of course is that it is not really possible to understand Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabāḥ (حسن صباح) رضى الله عنه without some deep grounding in ʾIsmāʿīlism in general and Fāṭimid thought specifically

In that Bayān I mentioned the saying of Winston Churchill, a contemporary of George Orwell who mentioned, much along the same lines, as these that: “History is written by the victors”. This being the case since the time of Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn ʾAyyūbī (صلاح الدين أيوب) (better known in the Western world as Saladin), the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria and founder of the ʾAyyūbid dynasty, who put an end to the Fāṭimid rule in 567/1171 the grandson of Ghengis Khan, Hulugu Khan (هولاكو خان/ 旭烈兀), with his Mongol raiders in 1256, who destroyed Alamūt, the fortress of Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabāḥ رضى الله عنه, and, importantly to us, burned the library that he رضى الله عنه had painstakingly put together over time. It has been very difficult to know since then the reality of the Fāṭimī Khilāfah and the true ‘mission’ of the *daʿwah*, which was to convert total darkness at every level into light. In every cycle of history a portion of darkness is reconverted into light and these cycles will continue until all matter is reconverted into *nūr* (light) and all matter that exists will be transformed back into the best of forms and it is light which will ultimately prevail.

On top of that the custodians of the literal legal ex-post facto prophecy, the legatees of socio-political ʾIslām, have done everything they could to both shroud the name of the Fāṭimids and reduce them to utter obscurity, casting doubt upon the sincerity and truth of their ʾIslām, because they knew it doesn’t matter in the end “who” you are in the world but rather it matters what you are spiritually.

And further what happened in Alamūt inspired so many people to write fantastic stories since the actual real books were destroyed which made clear what the mission of Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabāḥ really was. Here, for instance, is a hyperbolic example by the 20th century “Sufi” author Idries Shah writing under the pseudonym of Arkon Daraul in *A History of Secret Societies* (Citadel Press 1961/1989)

“Two men in the year 1092 stood on the ramparts of a medieval castle - the Eagle's Nest – perched high upon the crags of the Persian mountains: the personal representative of the Emperor and the veiled figure who claimed to be the incarnation of God on earth. Ḥasan, son of Ṣabāḥ, Sheikh of the Mountains and leader of the Assassins, spoke: ‘You see that devotee standing guard on yonder turret-top? Watch!’

“He made a signal and instantly the white-robed figure threw up his hands in salutation, and cast himself two thousand feet into the foaming torrent which surrounded the fortress.

“‘I have seventy thousand men – and women – throughout Asia, each one of them ready to do my bidding. Can your master, Mālik Shah, say the same? And he asks me to surrender to his sovereignty! This is your answer. Go!’

“Such a scene may be worthy of the most exaggerated of horror films. And yet it took place in historical fact. The only quibble made by the chronicler of the time was that Ḥasan’s devotees numbered ‘only about forty thousand’.

“How this man Ṣabāḥ came by his uncanny power, and how his devotees struck terror into the hearts of men from the Caspian to Egypt, is one of the most extraordinary of all tales of secret societies. Today, the sect of the ḥaṣḥīshīn (druggers) still exists in the form of the ʾIsmāʿīlī (Ishmaelites), whose undisputed chief, endowed by them with divine attributes, is the Aga Khan.

“Like many another secret cult, the Assassin organization was based upon an earlier association. In order to understand how they worked and what their objectives were, we must begin with these roots.

“It must be remembered that the followers of ʾIslām in the seventh century A.D. split into two divisions: the orthodox, who regard Mohammed as the bringer of divine inspiration; and the Shiah, who consider that Ali, his successor, the Fourth Imam (leader), was more important. It is with the Shiah that we are concerned here.

“From the beginning of the split in the early days of ʾIslām, the Shiah relied for survival upon secrecy, organization and initiation. Although the minority party in ʾIslām, they believed that they could overcome the majority (and eventually the whole world) by superior organization and power.

“To this end they started a number of societies which practised secret rites in which the personality of Ali was worshipped, and whose rank and file were trained to struggle above all for the accomplishment of world dominion.

“One of the most successful secret societies which the Shiahs founded was centred around the Abode of Learning in Cairo, which was the training-ground for fanatics who were conditioned by the most cunning methods to believe in a special divine mission. In order to do this, the original democratic ʿIslāmic ideas had to be overcome by skilled teachers, acting under the orders of the Caliph of the Fatimites, who ruled Egypt at that time.

“Members were enrolled, on the understanding that they were to receive hidden power and timeless wisdom which would enable them to become as important in life as some of the teachers. And the Caliph saw to it that the instructors were no ordinary men. The supreme judge was one of them; another was the commander-in-chief of the army; a third the minister of the Court. There was no lack of applicants. In any country where the highest officials of the realm formed a body of teachers, one would find the same thing.

“Classes were divided into study groups, some composed of men, others of women, some mixed, all collectively termed Assemblies of Wisdom [*mājālisu-l-ḥikmah*/مجالس الحكمة]. All lessons were carefully prepared, written down and submitted to the Caliph for his seal. At the end of the lecture all present kissed the seal: for did the Caliph not claim direct descent from Mohammed, through his son-in-law Ali and thence from Ismail, the seventh Imam? He was the embodiment of divinity, far more than any Tibetan lama ever was.

“The university, lavishly endowed and possessing the best manuscripts and scientific instruments available, received a grant of a quarter of a million gold pieces annually from the Caliph. Its external form was similar to the pattern of the ancient Arab universities, not much different from Oxford. But *its* real purpose was the complete transformation of the mind of the student.

“Students had to pass through nine degrees of initiation. In the first, the teachers threw their pupils into a state of doubt about all conventional ideas, religious and political. They used false analogy and every other device of argument to make the aspirant believe that what he had been taught by his previous mentors was prejudiced and capable of being challenged.

“The effect of this, according to the Arab historian, Makrizi, was to cause him to lean upon the personality of the teachers, as the only possible source of the proper interpretation of facts. At the same time, the teachers continually hinted that formal knowledge was but the cloak for hidden, inner and powerful truth, whose secret would be imparted when the youth was ready to receive it. This ‘confusion technique’ was carried out until the student reached the stage where he was prepared to swear a vow of blind allegiance to one or other of his teachers.

“This oath [ahd/العهد], together with certain secret signs, was administered in due course, and the candidate awarded the first degree of initiation. The second degree took the form of initiation into the fact that the Imams (successors of Mohammed) were the true and only sources of secret knowledge and power. Imams inspired the teachers. Therefore the student was to acknowledge every saying and act of his appointed guides as blessed and divinely inspired. In the third degree, the esoteric names of the Seven Imams were revealed, and the secret words by which they could be conjured and by which the powers inherent in the very repetition of their names could be liberated and used for the individual especially in the service of the sect.

“In the fourth degree, the succession of the Seven Mystical Lawgivers and magical personalities was given to the learner. These were characterized as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and Ismail. There were seven mystical ‘helpers’: Seth, Shem, Ishmael, Aaron, Simon, Ali, and Mohammed, the son of Ismail.

“This last [named] was dead, but he had a mysterious deputy, who was the Lord of the Time: authorized to give his instructions to the People of Truth, as the Ismaels called themselves. This hidden figure gave the Caliph the power to pretend that he was acting under even higher instructions.

“The fifth degree named twelve apostles under the seven prophets, whose names and functions and magical powers were described. In this degree the power to influence others by means of personal concentration was supposed to be taught. One writer claims that this was done merely by the repetition, for a period of three years to train the mind, of the magical word AK-ZABT-I.

“To obtain the sixth degree involved instruction in the methods of analytical and destructive argument, in which the postulant had to pass a stiff examination. The seventh degree brought revelation of the Great Secret: that all humanity and all creation were one and every single thing was part of the whole, which included the creative and destructive power. But, as an ʾIsmāʿīlī, the individual could make use of the power which was ready to be awakened within him, and overcome those who knew nothing of the immense potential of the rest of humanity. This power came through the aid of a mysterious power called the Lord of the Time.

“To qualify for the eighth degree, the aspirant had to believe that all religion, philosophy and the like were fraudulent. All that mattered was the individual, who could attain fulfilment only through servitude to the greatest developed power - the Imam. The ninth and last degree brought the revelation of the secret that there was no such thing as belief: all that mattered was action. And the only possessor of the reasons for carrying out any action was the chief of the sect.

“As a secret society, the organization of the ʾIsmāʿīlī as outlined above was undoubtedly powerful and seemed likely to produce a large number of devotees who would blindly obey the orders of whomever was in control of the edifice. But, as with other bodies of this kind, there were severe limitations from the point of view of effectiveness.

“Perhaps the phase of revolt or subversion planned by the society did not in the end get under way; perhaps it was not intended to work by any other means than training the individual. Be that as it may, its real success extended abroad only (in 1058) to Baghdad, where a member gained temporary control of Baghdad and coined money in the Egyptian Caliph's name. This sultan was slain by the Turks, who now entered the picture, and the Cairo headquarters was also threatened. By 1123, the society was closed down by the Vizier Afdal. The rise of Turkish power seemed to have discouraged the expansionist Cairo sect so strongly that they almost faded out, and little is heard of them after that date.

“It was left to Ḥasan, son of Ṣabāḥ, the Old Man of the Mountains, to perfect the system of the ailing secret society, and found an organization which endured for nearly another thousand years.

“Who was Ḥasan? He was the son of a Shiah... from Khorasan, a most bigoted man, who claimed that his ancestors were Arabs, from Kufa. This assumption was probably due to the fact that such a lineage bolstered up claims to religious importance, then as now, among Moslems. The people of the neighbourhood, many of them also Shiahs, stated very decisively that this Ali was a Persian, and so were his forebears. It is generally thought that this is the truer version. As the Governor of the Province was an orthodox Moslem, Ali spared no efforts to assume the same guise. This is considered to be completely permissible – the Doctrine of Intelligent Dissimulation. As there was some doubt as to his reliability in the religious sense, he retired into a monastic retreat, and sent his son Ḥasan to an orthodox school. This school was no ordinary one. It was the circle of disciples presided over by the redoubtable Imam Muwafiq, about whom it was said that every individual who enrolled under him eventually rose to great power.

“It was here that Ḥasan met Omar Khayyám, the tentmaker-poet and astronomer, later to be the poet laureate of Persia. Another of his schoolmates was Nizamu-l-Mulk, who rose from peasanthood to become prime minister. These three made a pact, according to Nizām’s autobiography, where whoever rose to high office first would help the others.

“Nizām, the courtier, became Vizier to Alp-Arslan the Turkish sultan of Persia, in accordance with his vow, and secured him [Omar Khayyám] a pension, which gave him a life of ease and indulgence in his beloved Nishapur, where many of his Rubāʿiāt poems were written. Meanwhile Ḥasan remained in obscurity, wandering through the Middle East, waiting for his chance to attain the power of which he had dreamed. Arslan the Lion died, and was succeeded by Malik Shah. Suddenly, Ḥasan presented himself to Nizām, demanding to be given a place at court. Delighted to fulfil his childhood vow, the vizier obtained him a favoured place, and relates what transpired thus in his autobiography:

“‘I had him made a minister by my strong and extravagant recommendations. Like his father, however, he proved to be a fraud, hypocrite and a self-seeking villain. He was so clever at dissimulation that he appeared to be pious when he was not, and before long he had somehow completely captured the mind of the Shah.’

“Malik Shah was young, and Ḥasan was trained in the Shiah art of winning people over by apparent honesty. But Nizām was still the most important man in the realm, with an impressive record of honest dealing and achievements so Ḥasan decided to eliminate him.

“The king had asked in that year, 1078, for a complete accounting of the revenue and expenditure of the empire, and Nizām told him that this would take over a year. Ḥasan, on the other hand, claimed that the whole work could be done in forty days, and offered to prove it. The task was assigned to him. And the accounts were prepared in the specified time. Something went wrong at this point. The balance of historical opinion holds that Nizām struck back at the last moment, saying ‘By Allāh, this man will destroy us all unless he is rendered harmless, though I cannot kill my classmate’

“Whatever the truth may be, it seems that Nizām managed to have some disparities introduced into the final calligraphic version of the accounts so that when Ḥasan started to read them they appeared so absurd that the Shah, in fury, ordered him to be exiled. As he had claimed to have written the accounts in his own hand, Ḥasan could not justify these incredible disparities.

“Ḥasan had friends in Isfahan, where he immediately fled. There survives a record of what he said there, which sheds interesting light upon what was in his mind. One of these friends. Abu-al-Fazal, notes that Ḥasan, after reciting the bitter tale of his downfall, shouted these words, in a state of uncontrollable rage: ‘If I had two, just two, devotees who would stand by me, then I would cause the downfall of that Turk and that peasant.’

“Fazal concluded that Ḥasan had taken leave of his senses, and tried to get him out of this ugly mood. Ḥasan took umbrage, and insisted that he was working on a plan, and that he would have his revenge. He set off for Egypt, there to mature his plans.

“Fazal was himself later to become a devotee of the Assassin chief, and Ḥasan, two decades later, reminded him of that day in Isfahan: ‘Here I am at Alamūt, Master of all I survey: and more. The Sultan and the peasant Vizier are dead. Have I not kept my vow? Was I the madman you thought me to be? I found my two devotees, who were necessary to my plans.’

“Ḥasan himself takes up the story of how his fortunes fared after the flight from Persia.

“He had been brought up in the secret doctrines of ʾIsmāʿīlism, and recognized the possibilities of power inherent in such a system. He knew that in Cairo there was a powerful nucleus of the society. And, if we are to believe the words of Fazal, he already had a plan whereby he could turn their followers into disciplined, devoted fanatics, willing to die for a leader. What was this plan? He had decided that it was not enough to promise paradise, fulfilment, eternal joy to people. He would actually show it to them; show it in the form of an artificial paradise, where houris played and fountains gushed sweet-scented waters, where every sensual wish was granted amid beautiful flowers and gilded pavilions. And this is what he eventually did.

“Ḥasan chose a hidden valley for the site of his paradise, described by Marco Polo [total fantasy btw], who passed this way in 1271:

““In a beautiful valley, enclosed between two lofty mountains, he had formed a luxurious garden stored with every delicious fruit and every fragrant shrub that could be procured. Palaces of various sizes and forms were erected in different parts of the grounds, ornamented with works of gold, with paintings and with furniture of rich silks. By means of small conduits contained in these buildings, streams of wine, milk, honey and some of pure water were seen to flow in every direction. The inhabitants of these places were elegant and beautiful damsels, accomplished in the arts of singing, playing upon all sorts of musical instruments, dancing, and especially those of dalliance and amorous allurements. Clothed in rich dresses, they were seen continually sporting and amusing themselves in the garden and pavilions, their female guardians being confined within doors and never allowed to appear. The object which the chief had in view in forming a garden of this fascinating kind was this: that Mahomet having promised to those who should obey his will the enjoyments of Paradise, where every species of sensual gratification should be found, in the society of beautiful nymphs, he was desirous of it being understood by his followers that he also was a prophet and a compeer of Mahomet, and had the power of admitting to Paradise such as he should choose to favour. In order that none without his licence should find their way into this delicious valley, he caused a strong and inexpugnable castle to be erected at the opening to it, through which the entry was by a secret passage.””

“Ḥasan began to attract young men from the surrounding countryside, between the ages of twelve and twenty: particularly those whom he marked out as possible material for the creation of killers. Every day he held court, a reception at which he spoke of the delights of Paradise...and at certain times he caused draughts of soporific nature to be administered to ten or a dozen youths, and when half dead with sleep he had them conveyed to the several palaces and apartments of the garden. Upon awakening from this state of lethargy their senses were struck by all the delightful objects, and each perceiving himself surrounded by lovely damsels, singing, playing, and attracting his regards by the most fascinating caresses, serving him also with delicious viands and exquisite wines, until, intoxicated with excess and enjoyment, amidst actual rivers of milk and wine, he believed himself assuredly in Paradise, and felt an unwillingness to relinquish its delights.

“When four or five days had thus been passed, they were thrown once more into a state of somnolency, and carried out of the garden. Upon being carried to his presence, and questioned by him as to where they had been, their answer was ‘in Paradise, through the favour of your highness’; and then, before the whole court who listened to them with eager astonishment and curiosity, they gave a circumstantial account of the scenes to which they had been witnesses.

“The chief thereupon addressing them said: ‘We have the assurance of our Prophet that he who defends his leader shall inherit Paradise, and if you show yourselves to be devoted to the obedience of my orders, that happy lot awaits you’.”

“Suicide was at first attempted by some; but the survivors were early told that only death in the obedience of Ḥasan’s orders could give the Key to Paradise. In the eleventh century it was not only credulous Persian peasants who would have believed such things were true. Even among more sophisticated people the reality of the gardens and houris of paradise were completely accepted. True, a good many Sufis preached that the garden was allegorical – but that still left more than a few people who believed that they could trust the evidence of their senses.

“*The Ancient Art of Imposture*, by Abdel-Rahman of Damascus, gives away another trick of Ḥasan’s.

“He had a deep, narrow pit sunk into the floor of his audience-chamber. One of his disciples stood in this, in such a way that his head and neck alone were visible above the floor. Around the neck was placed a circular dish in two pieces which fitted together, with a hole in the middle. This gave the impression that there was a severed head on a metal plate standing on the floor. In order to make the scene more plausible (if that is the word) Ḥasan had some fresh blood poured around the head, on the plate.

“Now certain recruits were brought in. ‘Tell them,’ commanded the chief, ‘what thou hast seen.’ The disciple then described the delights of Paradise. ‘You have seen the head of a man who died, whom you all knew. I have reanimated him to speak with his own tongue.’

“Later, the head was treacherously severed in earnest, and stuck for some time somewhere that the faithful would see it. The effect of this conjuring trick plus murder increased the enthusiasm for martyrdom to the required degree.

“There are many documented instances of the recklessness of the fidayeen (devotees) of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs, one witness being a Westerner who was treated a century later to a similar spectacle to that which had appalled the envoy of Mālik Shah. Henry, Count of Champagne, reports that he was travelling in 1194 through ʾIsmāʿīlī territory. The chief sent some persons to salute him and beg that, on his return he would stop at and partake of the hospitality of the castle. The Count accepted the invitation. As he returned, the Dāʿī-al-Kabir (Great Missionary) advanced to meet him, showed him every mark of honour, and let him view his castle and fortresses. Having passed through several, they came at length to one of the towers which rose to an exceeding height. On each tower stood two sentinels clad in white. ‘These,’ said the Chief, pointing to them, ‘obey me far better than the subjects of our Christians obey their lords’ and at a given signal two of them flung themselves down, and were dashed to pieces. ‘If you wish,’ said he to the astonished Count, ‘all my white ones shall do the same.’ The benevolent Count shrank from the proposal, and candidly avowed that no Christian prince could presume to look for such obedience from his subjects. When he was departing, with many valuable presents, the Chief said to him meaningly, ‘By means of these trusty servants I get rid of the enemies of our society.’

“Further details of the mentality of Ḥasan are given in what is supposed to be an autobiographical account of his early days: and it probably is in fact such, because the method of his conversion does seem to follow the pattern which has been observed in fanatics, of whatever religious or political persuasion.

“He was, he says, reared in the belief of the divine right of the Imams, by his father. He early on met an ʾIsmāʿīlī missionary (Emir Dhareb) with whom he argued strenuously against the Emir’s particular form of creed. Then, some time later, he went through a bout of severe illness, in which he feared to die, and began to think that the ʾIsmāʿīlī doctrine might really be the road to redemption and Paradise. If he died unconverted, he might be damned. Thus it was that as soon as he recovered he sought out another ʾIsmāʿīlī propagandist, Abu Najm, and then others. Eventually he went to Egypt, to study the teaching [of daʿwah] at its center in Cairo.

“He was received with honour by the Caliph, due to his former position at the Court of Mālik Shah. In order to increase their own importance, the high officials of the Court made a good deal of public play of the significance of the new convert; but this fact seemed in the end to help Ḥasan more than it did them. He entered into political intrigue and was arrested, then confined in a fortress. No sooner had he entered the prison than a minaret collapsed, and in some unexplained way this was interpreted as an omen that Ḥasan was in reality a divinely protected person. The Caliph, hurriedly making Ḥasan a number of valuable gifts, had him put aboard a ship sailing for north-west Africa. This gave him the funds which he was to use for setting up his ‘paradise’ – and also, through some quirk of fate, the disciples whom he sought.

“A tremendous storm blew up, terrifying the captain, crew and passengers alike. Prayers were held, and Ḥasan was asked to join. He refused. ‘The storm is my doing; how can I pray that it abate?’ he asked. ‘I have indicated the displeasure of the Almighty. If we sink, I shall not die, for I am immortal. If you want to be saved, believe in me, and I shall subdue the winds.’

“At first the offer was not accepted. Presently, however, when the ship seemed on the point of capsizing, the desperate passengers came to him and swore eternal allegiance. Ḥasan remained calm and continued so until the storm abated. The ship was then driven on to the coast of Syria, where Ḥasan went ashore, together with two of the passengers, who became his first real disciples.

“Ḥasan was not yet ready for the fulfilment of his destiny as he saw it. For the time being, he was travelling under the guise of a missionary [*dāʿī*/داعي] of the Caliph in Cairo. From Aleppo he went to Baghdad, seeking a headquarters where he should be safe from interference and where he yet could become powerful enough to expand. The road led him deep into Persia. Travelling through the country, he made converts to his ideas, which were still apparently strongly based upon the secret doctrines of the Egyptian ʿIsmāʿīlīs.

“Everywhere he created a really devoted disciple [*fidāʾī*/فدائي] he bade him stay and try to enlarge the circle of his followers. These circles became hatching-grounds for the production of ‘self-sacrificers’, the initiates who were drawn from the ranks of the most promising ordinary converts. Thus it was that miniature training centers, modelled upon the Abode of Learning, were set into being within a very few months of his return to his homeland.

“During his travels, a trusted lieutenant – one Ḥusayn Kaḥīnī – reported that the Iraki district where the fortress of Alamūt was situated seemed to be an ideal place for proselytism. Most of the ordinary people of that place, in fact, had been persuaded into the ʿIsmāʿīlī way of thinking. The only obstacle was the Governor – Ali Mahdi – who looked upon the Caliph of Baghdad as his spiritual and temporal lord. The first converts were expelled from the country. Before many months, however, there were so many ʿIsmāʿīlīs among the populace that the Governor was compelled to allow them to return. Ḥasan, though, he would not brook. The prospective owner of Alamūt decided to try a trick. He offered the Governor three thousand pieces of gold for ‘the amount of land which could be encompassed by the hide of an ox’.

“When Mahdi agreed to such a sale, Ḥasan produced a skin, cut it into the thinnest possible thongs, and joined them together to form a string which encompassed the castle of Alamūt. Although the Governor refused to honour any such bargain, Ḥasan produced an order from a very highly placed official of the Seljuk rulers, ordering that the fortress be handed over to Ḥasan for three thousand gold pieces. It turned out that this official was himself a secret follower of the Sheikh of the Mountain.

“The year was A.D. 1090. Ḥasan was now ready for the next part of his plan.

“He attacked and routed the troops of the Emir who had been placed in the governorship of the Province, and subsequently welded the people of the surrounding districts into a firm band of diligent and trustworthy workers and soldiers, answerable to him alone. Within two years the Vizier, Nizam-ul-Mulk, had been stabbed to the heart by an assassin sent by Ḥasan, and the Emperor Mālik Shah, who dared to send troops against him, died in grave suspicion of poison. Ḥasan’s revenge upon his classmate was to make him the very first target of his reign of terror. With the king’s death, the whole realm was split up into warring factions. For a long time the Assassins alone retained their cohesion. In under a decade they had made themselves masters of all Persian Irak, and of many forts throughout the empire. This they did by forays, direct attacks, the poisoned dagger, and in any other manner which seemed expedient. The orthodox religious leaders pronounced one interdiction after another against their doctrines – all to no effect.

“By now the entire loyalty of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs under him had been transferred from the Caliph to the personality of the Sheikh of the Mountain, who became the terror of every prince in that part of Asia, the Crusader chiefs included. Despite, and despising fatigues, dangers and tortures, the Assassins joyfully gave their lives whenever it pleased the great master, who required them either to protect himself or to carry out his mandates of death. The victim having been pointed out, the faithful, clothed in a white tunic with a red sash, the colours of innocence and blood, went on their mission without being deterred by distance or danger. Having found the person they sought, they awaited the favourable moment for slaying him, and their daggers seldom missed their aim.

“Richard the Lionheart was at one time accused of having asked the ‘Lord of the Mountain’ to have Conrad of Montferrat killed; a plot which was carried out thus: ‘Two assassins allowed themselves to be baptized and placing themselves beside him, seemed intent only on praying. But the favourable opportunity presented itself; they stabbed him and one took refuge in the church. But hearing that the prince had been carried off still alive, he again forced himself into Montferrat’s presence, and stabbed him a second time; and then expired, without a complaint, amidst refined tortures.’ The Order of the Assassins had perfected their method of securing the loyalty of human beings to an extent and on a scale seldom paralleled.

“The Assassins carried on the battle on two fronts. They fought whichever side in the Crusades served their purposes. At the same time they continued the struggle against the Persians. The son and successor of Nizām-al-Mulk was laid low by an Assassin dagger. The Sultan, who had succeeded his father Mālik Shah and gained power over most of his territories was marching against them. One morning, however, he awoke with an Assassin weapon stuck neatly into the ground near his head. Underneath it was a note, warning him to call off the proposed siege of Alamūt. He came to terms with the Assassins, powerful ruler though he undoubtedly was. They had what amounted to a free hand, in exchange for a pact by which they promised to reduce their military power.

“Ḥasan lived for thirty-four years after his acquisition of Alamūt. On only two occasions had he even left his rooms: yet he ruled an invisible empire as great and as fearsome as any man before – or since. He seemed to realize that death was almost upon him, and calmly began to make plans for the perpetual continuance of the Order of the Assassins.” That is how the 20th century “Sūfī” author Idries Shah, writing under the pseudonym of Arkon Daraul, portrayed the figure of Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ ﷺ.



Here is another lurid example of how *Ḥasan Bin Sabbah and the Secret Order of ḥashīshīns* was portrayed in an essay under that title was first published on-line by *disinformation* on March 22, 2001.

“The story of Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ is a tale of sex, drugs, myth, and murder. A secluded mountain fortress, a paradisaal garden, poison dipped daggers, and covert political maneuverings are the ingredients of this alchemical mixture, which is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing true stories ever told.

“Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ – businessman, scholar, heresiarch, mystic, murderer, ascetic, and political revolutionary – was born in Persia (Iran) around 1034. As a child, the man who would one day claim to be the incarnation of God on earth (probably just another way of saying he was Enlightened) was a diligent student of theology.

“Supposedly, Ḥasan was schoolmates with Nizamul Mulk (the future vizier to the sultan of Persia) and Omar Khayyam (the great poet, astronomer and mathematician). These three future luminaries made a pact where, if one of them reached a position of power and influence, he would assist his companions.

“As a young man, Ḥasan traveled to Egypt, where he remained for a year and a half. Here he was taught at the illustrious Abode of Learning in Cairo, which was a Shiite training center (the Shiites are a branch within the ʾIslāmīc community, they broke off from the mainstream Sunnis after a dispute over who should succeed the prophet Muhammad).

“At the Abode, students were taught to question ʾIslāmīc dogma, to the point where their only source of the truth lay in the teachings of their all-powerful instructors. The students had to ascend through nine degrees, until finally they were taught the Ultimate Truth: that the world is created through actions, and beliefs are powerless distractions used to enslave the masses. This system would later serve as the model for the organizational structure of the ḥaṣḥīṣhins . . .

“Ḥasan ran into trouble in Egypt, however, after a controversy arose over who should succeed the Fatimid caliph. The Fatimids, who ruled Egypt at the time, were the heads of the ʾIsmāʿīlī, a sect of ʾIslām that separated from the mainstream Shiites. Before the Fatimid caliph died, he appointed his youngest son to take over the dynasty, because his oldest son died before he did. This infuriated Ṣabāḥ, who believed the descendant of the caliph’s oldest son, Nizar, was the rightful heir to the throne.

“Ṣabāḥ was imprisoned in Egypt for supporting Nizār, but, as luck would have it, a prison wall collapsed and he fled to Persia. While searching for a permanent residence, Ḥasan found a secluded fortress high in the mountains of Qazwin. This castle, called Alamūt (“the eagle’s nest”) was the ideal stronghold for Ḥasan’s new sect, the Nizāri ʾIsmāʿīlites. Alamūt was positioned in a central location, and so was an excellent hub from which Ḥasan could spread ʾIsmāʿīlī propaganda.

“Ḥasan went about securing Alamūt using subtle trickery and persuasion. Whilst bargaining with the owner of Alamūt, he requested only a portion of land that could be covered by the skin of a cow. The owner agreed, not realizing how clever and resourceful Ḥasan could be. Ḥasan proceeded to divide a cow’s hide into such thin layers that he was able to cover the entire surface area of the fortress. The owner was forced to live up to his end of the bargain, and Ḥasan now had a stronghold from which he could extend his influence throughout the Mideast and, indeed, the history of Western civilization.



The Assassin fortress of Alamūt.

“When word reached Nizām al-Mulk, that a childhood friend of Ḥasan’s, had secured Alamūt, the Nizām grew so inflamed with jealousy and rage that he sent an army to lay siege to the fortress, a plot that failed miserably. For this, Ḥasan had the Nizām killed by a dagger straight to the heart. So much for the pact.

“Within Alamūt, Ḥasan built the legendary ‘Garden of Earthly Delights’, which would play an important role in the initiatic rites of the ḥaṣḥīshīns (also called the “Assassins”).

“The garden lay in a beautiful valley nestled between two high mountains. Here he had imported exotic plants, birds, and animals from all over the world. Surrounding the garden were luxurious palaces of marble and gold, decorated with beautiful paintings and fine silk furniture. Streams of milk, wine, and honey flowed throughout this earthly paradise, while fountains gushed with wine and pure spring water.

“The initiate, after being knocked out by a powerful potion mixed with ḥaṣḥīsh, would be carried into the garden. When he awoke from his slumber, he would be greeted by a host of beautiful teenage virgins (*ḥūrīyah*/حوریه), who sang and danced and played lovely instruments for him. As he drifted into an ecstatic daze the girls would go to work on the initiate...no wonder Ḥasan could demand absolute loyalty from his followers, no questions asked...

“This was only a small part of Ḥasan’s system, which was divided into seven degrees. The ḥaṣḥīshīns combined both the exoteric (“God’s communicated, Law”) and esoteric (subjective, mystical) doctrines of ʿIslām. Ṣabbāḥ was a noted alchemist, and a student of Sufism, so part of the initiatic curriculum for the future ḥaṣḥīshīns involved mastering occult methods for reaching higher planes of consciousness.

Of course, they were also taught how to properly kill a man using poison or a dagger. Initiates were trained to learn multiple languages, as well as the dress and manners of merchants, beggars, monks, priests and soldiers. Moreover, they were taught to fake beliefs and devotion to every major religion of that era. In this way, an Assassin could pretend to be anyone from a well-to-do merchant to a Sufi mystic, a Christian, or a common soldier.

“The ḥaṣḥīṣhīn Order was set up much like any traditional bureaucratic organization. At the top of the hierarchy sat Ḥasan, the Old Man of the Mountain, who preached absolute devotion to a transcendental God. Below him were the grand priories (enlightened mystics), the propagandists, and finally the fidais, who were the lowest ranking ḥaṣḥīṣhīns. The fidais were self-sacrificers (called “the destroying angels”) who were willing to commit any atrocity their master demanded of them, including suicide. They dressed in white tunics with red sashes: colours that represented innocence and blood.

“As the ḥaṣḥīṣhīns gained power and influence, the sultan of Persia grew agitated. He decided to send troops to storm Alamūt, which, like the similar attack attempted by his vizier, was a pathetic failure. Ḥasan had the sultan poisoned, and after his death the kingdom of Persia split into warring factions, which made the Assassins the most cohesive and powerful group in Persia for many years.

“During this time the Assassins turned murder into an artform, mastering the many fatal uses of the dagger (which they often dipped in poison). But these were intellectuals, not mindless murderous brutes by any means, so their favorite means of extending influence was through spreading propaganda. They would often gain support from powerfully positioned women and children by impressing them with fantastic dresses, jewels, and toys. Also, they were known to kidnap some of the most distinguished minds of the Mideast and use them as teachers in the school or as advisors in worldly affairs. It didn’t take long before most of Persia was ʾIsmāʿilī.

“As for the man responsible for all this madness, Ḥasan bin Ṣabāḥ, he was something of a mystery. After securing Alamūt, Ḥasan lived the remainder of his life holed up in his room. It is said that he left his living quarters only twice in this period. He was an ascetic, a mystic, who wrote a number of important theological treatises. This might seem counter-intuitive, but the reason Ḥasan was so ambitious (and resorted to such extreme measures) is because he was a deeply devoted believer in the ʾIsmāʿilī faith, not because of selfish greed or megalomania.

“In fact, Ḥasan may well have been a direct descendant of the Imam genealogy, but he refused to use this to his advantage, saying ‘I would rather be the Imam’s chosen servant than his unworthy son.

“Within Alamūt, convivialities like drinking and playing musical instruments were strictly forbidden. This was a vacuum tight operation, and Ḥasan demanded unwavering attention and devotion from his followers. He was so severe, in fact, that he had his only two sons executed: one for drinking, the other for committing a senseless murder.

“Ḥasan died in 1124, at the age of 90. Having killed his only two potential heirs, he appointed two of his generals to succeed him. One took over the mystical elements of the order, while the other controlled the military and political affairs. During this time the Seljuq Dynasty once again took control in Persia. The new sultan made a pact with the Assassins, whereby the Assassins were given autonomy in exchange for reducing their military forces.

“The ḥaṣḥīshīns persisted for over 100 years after Ṣabāḥ’s death, but Alamūt was finally laid siege to and conquered in 1256 by Halaku [Hulugu] Khan, son of Ghengis Khan. A man called Juwayni was ordered to write a complete history of the Assassins to based on the records in the Alamūt library which he then destroyed which is where most of our actual historical data about the order comes from.

“Though some have questioned the historical validity of the Assassin’s ḥaṣḥīsh use, it is stated clearly as fact in this carefully researched history. Also, in this book, it is written that the Assassins did not eat hashish to relax themselves before going on a murderous rampage, as is popularly believed, but rather would consume the drug before going to the garden one last time, just prior to their suicide mission.

“After the fall of Alamūt, most of the remaining Assassins were forced underground, where they would await word that the order was back in business. To this day, a branch of Nizari ʿIsmāʿīlīs (who dropped the title “ḥaṣḥīshīns”) still persist. They are led by one Aga Khan, whose, progressive, globalist rhetoric sounds strangely similar to the utopian worldview of Buckminster Fuller.

“The secret order that Ḥasan bin Ṣabāḥ created had a significant impact on all subsequent cults and secret societies. During the Crusades, the ḥaṣḥīshīns fought both for and against the Crusaders, whichever suited their agenda. As a result, the Crusaders brought back to Europe the Assassins’ system, which would be passed down and mimicked by numerous secret societies in the West.

“The Knights Templar, the Society of Jesus [Jesuits], Priory de Sion, the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, etc. all owe their organizational efficiency to Ḥasan. In fact, the Illuminati had their origins in the mystical aspect of the ḥaṣḥīshīn’s order, although most equate the Illuminati with the Bavarian Illuminati, which was a revised version of the ḥaṣḥīshīn system.

“Ḥasan bin Ṣabāḥ should serve as the ideal archetype for future revolutionaries. As money becomes the sole (and not to mention spectral) representation of power, governments gradually decline in effectiveness, and the Invisible Hand becomes the only force pushing us along. Secret societies like the ḥaṣḥīshīns, self-protected and pursuing its own agendas, thrive in our present environment.”



Then there is Bernard Lewis, a British-American professor of history at Princeton University, who traces the history of the secret ʾIslāmīc sect known as the Assassins, an order of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs that used assassinations throughout the Middle Ages to achieve political, military, and religious goals to modern ʾIslāmīc terrorism.

His take is less lurid and more political befitting a historian who has been called, “perhaps the most articulate and learned Zionist advocate in the North American Middle East academic community.”

A review of his newly re-issued book *The Assassins* by Kevin Rushby in the Guardian, is a bit more low key.

“They have among them a Master, who strikes the greatest fear into all Saracen princes both far and near, as well as the neighboring Christian lords. For he has the habit of killing them in an astonishing way...the Prince gives each one of [his followers] a golden dagger and sends them out to kill whichever prince he has marked down.” For this service, the Master promises them “the joys of paradise”.

“So it was that Christendom first heard, in 1175, of the Old Man of the Mountains and his murderous sect of Assassins. Several notable killings had preceded this news and more were to follow, but a century later the group disintegrated and the Old Man’s followers went back to peasant farming. What did survive, however, was the image of devoted killers, dagger in one hand and passport to paradise in the other. It is imagery that Osama bin Laden has deployed, but how much, one wonders, does he know of this heritage? Has it influenced his thinking?”

“Such questions make Bernard Lewis's newly reissued classic *The Assassins*, first published in 1967, a fascinating read; the book also offers a tempting opportunity to stroll in the pleasure gardens of historical parallels – gardens that are thickly planted, naturally, with fiendish booby traps.

“The forces of mysticism, passion and violence have always been a volatile combination, inspiring murderous sects throughout history. The Kali-worshipping Indian Thugs strangled an estimated one million souls before Captain William Sleeman stopped them in the 1830s [his account of how it was done ought to be compulsory reading for anti-terrorism agents but also is open to doubt in part]. The origins of that cult are unknown, though there is evidence that they lay in eighth-century Persia. It was there, in 1090, that a missionary by the name of Ḥasan-i Sabah set up shop in Alamūt, a remote stronghold in the mountains south of the Caspian Sea.

“Son of a Yemeni emigrant to Persia, Ḥasan became an ʾIsmāʿīlī and, as such, a heretic from an oppressed minority. His contribution was to marry the mystical and violent impulses of his followers to the politics of anguish and frustration. Legend has it that recruits were softened with ideology, then drugged and transported to a wonderful palace garden. (One explanation of the word assassin is that it derives from the Arabic ḥaṣḥīṣh.) Waking to find themselves surrounded by women, wine and song, the thoroughly fuddled youths concluded that they were in paradise. Alas, the idyll did not last. Drugged again, they found themselves before the Old Man, who confirmed that they had indeed visited the heavenly abode promised by the Koran. He then offered a return route, via murder.

“The truth is hidden somewhere inside such legends, and Professor Lewis is a dependable guide to the historical informants, all of whom had an axe to grind – even if not all wished subsequently to bury it between the ears of an appointed victim. In Ḥasan's time as now, power in the ʾIslāmīc world was based among a small and wealthy elite (for Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad read sons of ibn Saud). The Assassins wanted to destroy this dynasty. In their ferocious attempts it was usually Muslims who suffered, not crusaders, as is often thought. Most victims were Sunnis, and a few were immensely powerful; the murder of grand vizier Nizam-ul-Mulk was the 11th-century equivalent of toppling the twin towers. More that a few crusaders fell to the golden dagger.

“The Marquis Conrad of Montferrat, King of Jerusalem, was one. In a twist worthy of the CIA, Richard the Lionheart was implicated, reputedly hiring the Muslim Assassins himself. But Bin Laden's avowed aim of clearing “Crusaders and Jews” from holy places was never on the Assassin agenda.

“In the 12th century one group remained untouched. The Old Man recognised that the organisation of the Knights Hospitallers made them unassailable by his methods. If one was struck down, another would step forward. Like Hydra, it was not a beast that could be defeated by head-lobbing, a lesson for both sides in the current situation. With autocrats and tyrants, such tactics appeared more effective, and yet, as the list of murders sanctioned from Alamūt lengthened, no long-term advantages accrued – only a vast stock of hatred and suspicion. Later, when the ruling powers were stronger, the temptation to send in the medieval equivalent of the F-16s was irresistible. In Persia, however, the Assassins were finished off by the Mongols; in Syria by the Egyptian Mamluks.

“The Assassin campaign was paralleled by a withering of ʾIsmāʿīlī influence in philosophy, science and religion. Tellingly, Lewis says, “Under Hasan-i Sabbah and his successors, the ʾIsmāʿīlī posed terrible political, military and social problems to Sunni ʾIslām, but they no longer offered an intellectual challenge. More and more, their religion acquired the magical and emotional qualities, the redemptionist and millenarian hopes, associated with the cults of the dispossessed, the disprivileged and the unstable’.

“Where the Assassins did succeed was in leaving a poisonous legacy: a legacy so virulent, it can reach down the centuries and infect minds as diverse as those of children in Gaza, Muslim youths in Britain and, most notably of all, the wealthy son of a Yemeni emigrant to Saudi Arabia. That is why, despite occasional lapses, Lewis’ book is essential reading for us and no comfort to anyone.”



Even Marco Polo, as noted, added to the legend, On his return home from China he ventured into a region which he calls Mulehet, south of the Caspian sea, in which the Assassin stronghold of Alamūt stands. On his return home, he claimed:

“Mulehet, the name given to heretical Saracens, is also the name of the famous place where the Old Man of the Mountain used to live.”

This is the story of the Old Man (The Ṣhaykh) just as it was told to Marco Polo by many people.

“According to legend, the Old Man was called Alaodin. He had made, in a valley between two mountains, the biggest and most beautiful garden imaginable. Every kind of wonderful fruit grew there. There were glorious houses and palaces decorated with gold and paintings of the most magnificent things in the world. Fresh water, wine, milk and honey flowed in streams. The loveliest girls versed in the arts of caressing and flattering men played every musical instrument, danced and sang better than any other women. The Old Man had persuaded his men that this was Paradise. The Prophet Mohammed had taught that those who went to Paradise would find as many beautiful women as they wanted, rivers of wine, milk, honey and fresh water. So the Old Man of the Mountain had his garden built like Mohammed’s Paradise and the Saracens really believed it was Paradise.”

Marco Polo goes on to explain how this belief was maintained. Young men who were being trained for a mission of assassination were given a sleeping draught and then taken into the garden while unconscious. When they awoke, their ravishing surroundings naturally persuaded them that they were in Paradise itself. They remained in this happy state until a victim was designated, when they would once more be drugged, and were removed, still asleep, from the garden. The certainty, born of experience, that Paradise existed and would be their reward, not only strengthened their determination to succeed in their task, it also removed all fear of failure – knowing what awaited them in the next world, they did not fear death. The Old Man won the devotion of his agents both by administering drugs and by exploiting their simple piety.

Despite his taste for colourful detail, Marco Polo was also a realist. He ends his description of the Assassins with the comment that:

“Many kings and barons paid tribute to the Old Man and cultivated his friendship for fear of being murdered. The Old Man was aided in this by the fact that the kings were always quarrelling amongst themselves and were not united under one power.”

Then there is the book *Samarkand* by Amin Maalouf, a heavily fictionalised romantic “biography” and tale of events surrounding the original manuscript of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam which, in the end, says the author, unbelievably sank with the Titanic.

Samarkand tells how the three influential contemporaries, Ḥasan bin Sabah, the poet Omar Khayyam and the vizier Nizam al-Mulk were originally allies. But Nizam and Ḥasan differed in their religious and political views, and in 1092 Nizam al-Mulk became the first victim of the *Assassins*.”

The origin of the organisation’s name is unclear. Maalouf follows a number of ʾIsmāʿīlī sources in affirming that “assassin” is derived from the Arabic for foundation (أساس/ʾāssās), via ʾassassiyūn or fundamentalists; they were simply believers in a purer and more basic form of ʾIslām. Interestingly enough the name *al-Qāʿidah* (القاعدة) has much the same meaning – the foundation or the base.

A more highly-coloured derivation, favoured by Western writers, points to the Arabic ḥaṣḥaṣhīn (eaters of ḥaṣḥīṣ) to explain both the name of the Assassins and their fanatical devotion to their leader, the Old Man of the Mountain: their sanguinary tactics were fueled by narcotics.

This in turn inspired many avant garde writers and readers of the late 20th century from Burroughs to Hakim Bey to delve into the legend of Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāh and even internet bloggers as in:

“Hassan-i-Sabbah . . . the only spiritual leader with anything to say in the Space Age.” – William S. Burroughs

“Maxim. ‘Nothing is true, everything is permitted’. Hmm, yes the words of Ḥasan-i-Sabbah. But permitted only for the initiate. Of course others say the real statement was ‘Nothing is Haram, all is Halal’ which makes it more a statement about Shariah (Law) in the context of esoteric Shiite initiation in which the Imam is above the Law and is salvific.

“Which brings me to a point in the Quran in Surah Khaf (Surah of the Cave) where the companion of Moses who repairs the wall of unjust people, sinks a boat and kills a boy; much to the chagrin of Moses the Lawgiver, YET it appears that the mysterious companion, known popularly as Khidr, was trying to initiate Moses into the realm of the Perfect Man, one who is apart from the Law and not answerable to the deity.

“Nevertheless, Khidr’s outrageous actions were not simply whimsical acting out but based on a deeper intuition of the situation at hand, something which the Law and God do not allow for. Thus, the message is one of freedom, but not a freedom to act unjustly, but a freedom to act in harmony with necessity, to master the moment.

“Ibn Arabi spoke of the Imam of one’s own being and it is this parallel to one’s gnosis of Christ that is soteriological and gnostic in ʿIslām, a thread of which still exists in some pockets of sufis here and there, along with genuine initiation into the secrets of the Perfect Man or al-ʿInsān al-Kāmal.”

“Hakim Bey (Peter Lamborn Wilson), who is something of a modern day Sabbah, has written many tracts about the ḥaṣḥīṣhīns, including a section in the classic Temporary Autonomous Zone where Bey uses the Assassins as a model for the types of personalities needed to create and sustain a TAZ, saying “Each who enter the realm of the Imam-of-one’s-own-being becomes a sultan of inverted revelation, a monarch of abrogation and apostasy.”

“Ḥasan bin Sabbah should serve as the ideal archetype for future revolutionaries. As money becomes the sole (and not to mention spectral) representation of power, governments gradually decline in effectiveness, and the Invisible Hand becomes the only force pushing us along. Secret societies like the ḥaṣḥīṣhīns, self-protected and pursuing its own agendas, would thrive in our environment.”

Hakim Bey, writing under his real name, provides an excellent history of Ḥasan and the Assassins. The article below appeared in Peter Lamborn Wilson’s *Scandal: Essays in ʿIslāmic Heresy*, published by Autonomedia, PO Box 568, Williamsburg Station, Brooklyn, NY, USA. © Peter Lamborn Wilson (a.k.a. Hakim Bey).



Secrets of the Assassins by Peter Lamborn Wilson

“After the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the new ʿIslāmic community was ruled in succession by four of his close Companions, chosen by the people and called the Rightfully-guided Caliphs. The last of these was Ali ibn Abu Talib; the Prophet’s son-in-law.

“Ali had his own ardent followers among the faithful, who came to be called Shi’a or “adherents”. They believed that Ali should have succeeded Mohammad by right, and that after him his sons (the Prophet’s grandsons) Ḥasan and Husayn should have ruled; and after them, their sons, and so on in quasi-monarchial succession.

“In fact except for Ali none of them ever ruled all the Muslim world. Instead they became a line of pretenders, and in effect heads of a branch of ʿIslām called Shiism. In opposition to the orthodox (Sunni) Caliphs in Baghdad these descendants of the Prophet came to be known as the Imams.

“To the Shiites an Imam is far more, far higher in rank than a Caliph. Ali ruled by right because of his spiritual greatness, which the Prophet recognized by appointing him his successor (in fact Ali is also revered by the Sufis as ‘founder’ and prototype of the Moslem saint). Shiites differ from orthodox or Sunni Moslems in believing that this spiritual pre-eminence was transferred to Ali’s descendants through Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet.

“The sixth Shiite Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, had two sons. The elder, Ismail, was chosen as successor. But he died before his father. Jafar then declared his own younger son Musa the new successor instead.

“But Ismail had already given birth to a son – Mohammad ibn Ismail – who he proclaimed to be the next Imam. Ismail’s followers split with Jafar over this question and followed Ismail’s son instead of Musa. Thus they came to be known as ʾIsmāʿīlī.

“Musa’s descendants ruled ‘orthodox’ Shiism. A few generations later, the Twelfth Imam in this line vanished without trace from the material world. He still lives on the spiritual plane, whence he will return at the end of this cycle of time. He is the “Hidden Imam”, the Mahdi foretold by the Prophet. “Twelver” [Ithnashariya] Shiism is the religion of Iran today.

“The ʾIsmāʿīlī Imams languished in concealment, heads of an underground movement which attracted the extreme mystics and revolutionaries of Shiism. Eventually they emerged as a powerful force at the head of an army, conquered Egypt and established the Fatimid dynasty, the so-called anti-Caliphate of Cairo.

“The early Fatimids ruled in an enlightened manner, and Cairo became the most cultured and open city of ʾIslām. They never succeeded in converting the rest of the ʾIslāmic world however; in fact, even most Egyptians failed to embrace ʾIsmāʿīlīm. The highly evolved mysticism of the sect was at once its special attraction and its major limitation.

“In 1074 a brilliant young Persian convert arrived in Cairo to be inducted into the higher initiatic (and political) ranks of ʾIsmāʿīlīm. But this young man, Ḥasan-i Sabbah, soon found himself embroiled in a struggle for power. The Caliph Mustansir had appointed his eldest son Nizar as successor. But a younger son, al-Mustali, was intriguing to supplant him. When Mustansir died, Nizar – the rightful heir – was imprisoned and murdered.

“Ḥasan-i Sabbah had intrigued for Nizar, and now was forced to flee Egypt. He eventually turned up in Persia again, head of a revolutionary Nizari movement. By some clever ruse he acquired command of the impregnable mountain fortress of Alamūt (“Eagle's Nest”) near Qazvin in Northwest Iran.

“Ḥasan-i Sabbah’s daring vision, ruthless and romantic, has become a legend in the ʾIslāmic world. With his followers he set out to recreate in miniature the glories of Cairo in this barren monochrome forsaken rock landscape.

“In order to protect this fortress of Alamūt and its tiny but intense civilization Ḥasan-i Sabbah relied on assassination. Any ruler or politician or religious leader who threatened the Nizaris went in danger of a fanatic’s dagger. In fact Ḥasan’s first major publicity coup was the murder of the Prime Minister of Persia, perhaps the most powerful man of the era (and according to legend, a childhood friend of ibn Sabbah’s).

“Once their fearful reputation was secure, the mere threat of being on the eso-terrorist hit-list was enough to deter most people from acting against the hated heretics. One theologian was first threatened with a knife (left by his pillow as he slept), then bribed with gold. When his disciples asked him why he had ceased to fulminate against Alamūt from his pulpit he answered that ʾIsmāʿīlī arguments were “both pointed and weighty”.

“Since the great library of Alamūt was eventually burned down, little is known of Ḥasan-i Sabbah’s actual teachings. Apparently he formed an initiatic hierarchy of seven circles based on that in Cairo, with assassins at the bottom and learned mystics at the top.

“ʾIsmāʿīlī mysticism is based on the concept of tāʾwīl (تَأْوِيلَ) or “spiritual hermeneutics”. Tāʾwīl actually means “to take something back to its source or to it’s deepest significance”. The Shiites had always practised this exegesis on the Koran itself, reading certain verses as veiled or symbolic allusions to Ali and the Imams. The ʾIsmāʿīlīs extended tāʾwīl much more radically.

“The whole structure of ʾIslām appeared to them as a shell; to get at its kernel of meaning the shell must be penetrated by tāʾwīl, and in fact broken open completely.

“The structure of ʾIslām, even more than most religions, is based on a dichotomy between exoteric and esoteric. On the one hand there is Divine Law (shariah), on the other hand the Spiritual Path (ṭarīqah).

“Usually the Path is seen as the esoteric kernel and the Law as the exoteric shell. But to ʾIsmāʿīlism the two together present a totality which in its turn becomes a symbol to be penetrated by tāʾwīl. Behind Law and Path is ultimate Reality [*ḥaqīqah*/حقيقة], God Himself in theological terms – Absolute Being in metaphysical terms.

“This Reality is not something outside human scope; in fact if it exists at all then it must manifest itself completely on the level of consciousness. Thus it must appear as a man – the Perfect Man [al-ʾinsān al-kāmal] – or the Imam. Knowledge of the Imam is direct perception of Reality itself. For Shiites the Family of the Prophet is the same as perfected consciousness.

“Once the Imam is realized, the levels of Law and Path fall away naturally like split husks. Knowledge of inner meaning frees one from adherence to outer form: the ultimate victory of the esoteric [*bāṭin*] over the exoteric [*dhāhir*].

“The ‘abrogation of the Law’ however was considered open heresy in ʾIslām. For their own protection Shiites had always been allowed to practise taqīyah, ‘permissible dissimulation’ or Concealment, and pretend to be orthodox to escape death or punishment. The ʾIsmāʿīlī could pretend to be Shiite or Sunni, whichever was most advantageous. For the Nizāris, then, to practise Concealment was to practise the Law; in other words, pretending to be orthodox meant obeying the ʾIslāmic Law. Ḥasan-i Sabbah imposed Concealment or taqīyyah on all but the highest ranks at Alamūt, because in the absence of the Imam the veil of illusion must naturally conceal the esoteric truth of perfect freedom.

“In fact, who was the Imam? As far as history was concerned, Nizār and his son died imprisoned and intestate. Ḥasan as-Sabbah was therefore a legitimist supporting a non-existent pretender! He never claimed to be the Imam himself, nor did his successor as “old Man of the Mountain,” nor did his successor.

“And yet they all preached ‘in the name of Nizār’. Presumably the answer to this mystery was revealed in the seventh circle of initiation.

Now the third Old Man of the Mountain Muhammad bin Kiya Buzurg [or, alternatively the hidden Imam al-Qahir bin al-Mūhtadī] had a son named Ḥasan, a youth who was learned, generous, eloquent and loveable. Moreover he was a mystic, an enthusiast for the deepest teachings of ʾIsmāʿīlism and Sufism.

Even during his father's lifetime some Alamūtis began to whisper that young Ḥasan was actually the true Imam; the father heard of these rumors and denied them. 'I am not the Imam', he said, 'so how could my son be the Imam?'

"In 1162 the father died and Ḥasan (call him Ḥasan II to distinguish him from Ḥasan-i Sabbah) became ruler of Alamūt. Two years later, on the seventeenth of Ramaḍān (August 8) in 1164, he proclaimed the *qiyāmah*, or Great Resurrection. In the middle of the month of Fasting, Alamūt broke its fast and proclaimed perpetual holiday.

"The resurrection of the dead in their bodies at the 'end of time' is one of the most difficult doctrines of ʾIslām (and Christianity as well). Taken literally it is absurd. Taken symbolically however it encapsulates the experience of the mystic. He 'dies before death' when he comes to realize the separative and alienated aspects of the self, the ego-as-programmed-illusion is 'reborn' in consciousness but he is reborn in the body, as an individual, the 'soul-at-peace'.

"When Ḥasan II [reputedly the hidden son of the second hidden Nizār Imam, al-Qahir bin al-Mūhtadī] proclaimed the Great Resurrection [*qiyāmah* / القيامة] which marked the End of Time he lifted the veil of concealment declaring himself ʾImām and abrogated the religious Law. He offered communal as well as individual participation in the mystic's great adventure: perfect freedom.

There are arguments as to "who" he was but the realization of perfect consciousness is the same as being of the family of Ali and whoever realises perfected consciousness is the Imam.

"The realized mystic 'becomes' a descendant of Ali (like the Persian Salman whom Ali adopted by covering him with his cloak, and who is much revered by Sufis, Shiites and ʾIsmāʿīlī alike).

"In Reality, ḥaqīqah, [if not actuality] Ḥasan II *was* the Imam because in the ʾIsmāʿīlī phrase, he had realised [become] the "Imam-of-his-own-being." The *qiyāmah* was thus an invitation to each of his followers to do the same, or at least to participate in the pleasures of paradise on earth. The legend of the paradisaal garden at Alamūt where the pleasures of paradise were enjoyed by the Assassins in the flesh, may stem from a folk memory of the *qiyāmah*. Or it may even be literally true. or the realized consciousness of this world is no other than paradise, and its bliss and pleasures are all permitted. The reflection of the spiritual state of the *qiyāmah*. for afterall the Qurʾān describes paradise as a garden.

“In 1166 Ḥasan II was murdered after only four years of rule. His enemies, in league with conservative elements at Alamūt who resented the *qiyāmah* and the dissolving of the old secret hierarchy (and their own power as hierarchs) and who feared to live thus openly as heretics, killed him and Ḥasan II’s son [Nūru-d-dīn Muḥammad] succeeded him, establishing the *qiyāmah* firmly as Nizāri doctrine.

“If the *qiyāmah* were accepted in its full implications however it would probably have brought about the dissolution and end of Nizari ʾIsmāʿīlism as a separate sect. Ḥasan II [ʾImām Ḥasan ʿAla Dhikrihi as-Salām] as Qāʾim or “Lord of the Resurrection” had released the Alamūtis from all struggle and all sense of legitimist urgency. Pure esotericism, after all, cannot be bound by any form.

“Ḥasan II’s son, therefore, compromised. Apparently he decided to ‘reveal’ that his father was, in fact and by blood, a direct descendant of Nizār. The story runs that after Ḥasan-i Sabbah had established Alamūt, a mysterious emissary delivered to him the infant grandson of Imam Nizār. The child was raised secretly at Alamūt. He grew up, had a son, and died. The son had a son who was born on the same day as the son of the Old Man of the Mountain, the outward ruler.

The infants were then surreptitiously exchanged in their cradles. Not even the Old Man knew of the ruse. Another version has the hidden ʾImām committing adultery with the Old Man’s wife, and producing as a love-child the infant Ḥasan II but this is usually dismissed as a lie to bring into doubt the morals of those concerned.

“The ʾIsmāʿīlī accepted these claims. Even after the fall of Alamūt to the Mongol hordes the line survived but along two different lines; the Nizāri and the Mustaʿali. The emphasis on Alid legitimacy has preserved the sect as a sect. Whether it is literally true or not, however, matters little to an understanding of the *qiyāmah*.

“With the proclamation of the Resurrection, the teachings of ʾIsmāʿīlism were forever expanded beyond the borders imposed on them by any historical event. The *qiyāmah* remains as a state of consciousness which anyone can adhere to and enter. A garden without walls, a sect without a church, a lost moment of ʾIslāmic history that refuses to be forgotten, standing outside time, a reproach or challenge to all legalism and moralism, to all the cruelty of the exoteric. An invitation to paradise.”



All of the above are just some of the many myths, half-truths, outright lies, romantic tales and some of the actual facts (as far as we know) surrounding the story of Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ and Alamūt. Where in all of this is the *really* real story?

The ʾIsmāʿīlī world view was remarkably rich and complex. It can not accurately be called either a philosophy or a theology but has features of both of these and is best referred to by the term theosophy, in the older sense of “divine wisdom”. The ʾIsmāʿīlīs must indeed have a strong claim to be one of the most remarkable speculative systems ever devised. To understand it we have to be prepared to make an imaginative leap into a conceptual universe which seems at first utterly remote from our own and yet is in someways surprisingly similar to those of science. They sought to understand the world and our place within it; they made use of the information and concepts that lay to hand and then from these they built up a complex and all embracing cosmology.

Many influences played a part in shaping the ʾIsmāʿīlī worldview but three stand out in particular: first, the belief that the Qurʾān contained an esoteric significance; second, the science of the day, especially astronomy and astrology, which could also be understood esoterically with the help of the ʾIsmāʿīlī interpretation of religion and third, Neoplatonism, which provided the philosophical underpinnings for the whole system in which these three strands were interwoven to give a rich and remarkable coherent pattern.

The ʾIsmāʿīlīs were Muslims, even though heretical ones in the eyes of the Sunnis, and the Qurʾān lay at the center of their thinking. But in common with other Shīʿah sects, the ʾIsmāʿīlī were not content to dwell on the surface meaning of the text but made use of a subtle and elaborate method of textual exegesis called *tāʾwīl*, which led them into a strange and exiting worlds not unlike the garden of forking paths of the South American writer Jorge Luis Borges.

Every verse of the sacred book, indeed every word and even every letter, has an esoteric inner (*bāṭin*) significance which is on top of and complementary to the exoteric surface meaning (*dhāhir*).

It may seem strange that the ʾIsmāʿīlī should have believed that Allāh ﷻ had concealed His meaning in such an abstruse manner but the idea that the truth must not be given out recklessly to all and sundry but may be revealed only to those who are ready to receive it was widespread in the ancient world and remains so today.

This important principle was reinforced in the ʾIsmāʿīlī's case by the need – in a predominantly hostile Sunni environment – to discriminate and conceal their ideas. The concept of dissimulation or (*taqīyyah*/تقية) was important for the ʾIsmāʿīlīs and they frequently made use of it both to protect their doctrines from hostile critics. The idea that the Qurʾān contains different levels of significance was not unique to ʾIsmāʿīlīs but was common to all Shīʿah groups.

Shīʿah writers speak of there being four levels of meaning in each verse of the Qurʾān: the first is the surface meaning, the second is a level of allusion or parable, the third is the hidden occult sense, and the fourth is the level of spiritual teachings. These four *valves* are intended for different levels of Muslims – the first is for ordinary Muslims, the second is for the elite, the third is for the friends of Allāh ﷺ, the inner circle of humanity, and the fourth is for the Prophets ﷺ, as per the saying attributed to ʿAlī ؑ the first ʾImām, which refers to four levels of meanings contained in the Qurʾān. The first being for oral recitation, the second for interior comprehension, the third setting out those things that are allowed and those that are not and the fourth level indicating the effect that Allāh ﷻ intends to produce in the human being by the verse in question.

A slightly different analysis, this time into three levels of significance, comes from the 14th century Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlī called ʾAbū Firās who compares the structure of religion to that of an egg. The shell is the exoteric aspect (*ḍḥahir*) which protects the delicate interior. The white albumen is the esoteric aspect (*bāṭin*) but inside this lies a still deeper truth, the secret of secrets (the *bāṭin* of the *bāṭin*/الباطن من الباطن) corresponding to the yolk. Having given us this analogy, ʾAbū Firās expands it. The shell symbolizes the physical body of man, the white his soul, and the yolk his highest principle.

In terms of the senses, these three levels related respectively to hearing, sight, and the heart – regarded as spiritual sense organs. The exoteric aspects of religion are apprehended with the ears, the esoteric with the eyes and the secret of secrets within the heart.

By a typically ʾIsmāʿīlī extension of the idea, the three levels of understanding also have a cosmological reference. The first level corresponds to the physical world and the earth element, the second level to the world of religion and to water, the third to the spiritual world and to air or the realm of the spirit.

But even this third level is concerned merely with the *knowledge* of Reality (*ḥaqiqah*), rather than with Reality itself; only Prophets ؑ have access to reality through direct acquaintance with the Mystery. This faculty depends on the immediate reception of divine inspiration via the mind and corresponds to the fire element which is burning too intensely for ordinary unawakened beings to withstand.

It might be thought that the attempt to find esoteric interpretation of the Qurʾān would be a comparatively late idea but there are indications that it goes back to the very beginning of ʾIslām, indeed to the Prophet ؑ himself. This is suggested by the saying of ibn ʿAbbās ؓ to one of his companions when he was speaking to a large group of men about a verse of the Qurʾān which deals with the creation of the seven heavens and the seven earths, and he cried out, “Oh man! If I comment on this verse in the way I’ve heard it explained by the Prophet ؑ himself you would stone me.”

However the search for the inner (*bāṭinī*) knowledge was not confined to the pages of The Book. Rather the ʾIsmāʿīlīs believed that the whole of nature has an esoteric significance, if only we have the eyes to see it. It is as though Allāh ؑ has constructed the entire universe as a text written in code; a gigantic cryptogram the key to which is provided by the Qurʾān.

But to be able to use the Qurʾān one has to understand how it works and what it really means *only* the Teacher, ultimately, after the passing of the Prophet ؑ, in the form of the ʾImām ؑ and his *wilayah* (ولاية) possesses the key to the requisite spiritual knowledge.

Hence the importance of understanding the shift between *nubuuwa* or revelation to *wilayah* or spiritual sovereignty allowing for the teaching the meaning *waḥī* (وحي). Hence the importance of the ḥadīth.

“Who does not not know the ʾImām of his time dies in ignorance.”

Without the Teacher one is at an almost complete loss and it was this understanding that was behind the *daʿwah* of the ʾIsmāʿīlī. We must return to Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ ؑ to see how this all fits together.

Outsiders from early on gained the impression that the movement of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs led by Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ ؑ represented a *new* call, and, indeed, it became designated as the ‘new call’ (*ad-daʿwa aj-jadida*) in contradistinction to the ‘old call’ (*ad-daʿwa al-qadīma*) of the Fāṭimid ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Egypt.

However, the ‘new call’ was no more than the reformulation of the established Shīʿah doctrine of *taʿlīm* or authoritative instruction.

This doctrine was restated more vigorously by Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ in a Persian treatise entitled *Čahār faṣl* or *The Four Chapters* (*al-faṣal al-arbaʿah* / الفصول الأربعة), which, although not fully available or extant, has been preserved fragmentarily by, amongst others, his contemporary ʾAbū-l-Faṭḥ Saḥrestānī.

In a series of four propositions Ḥasan argued for the inadequacy of human reason in knowing Allāh and for the necessity of an authoritative teacher (*al-muʿallim aṣ-ṣādiq* / المعلم صادق) as the spiritual guide of human beings, who should, in truth, be none other than the ʾImām of his time. Henceforth, the Nizāris became known also as the Taʿlimiyyah (التعليمية). The anti-ʾIsmāʿilī polemics of the contemporary Sunni establishment, led by Muḥammad al-Ghazālī and endorsed by Nizām-al-Mulk, were focused directly against this doctrine of *taʿlīm*, which was the central doctrine of both the Fāṭimī and the Nizāri ʾIsmāʿilī teachings of Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ.

Given some of the lewd, common and lacivious opinions expressed in the earlier part of this *bayān* I would now like the reader/listener to consider the following, which is much closer to the truth regarding who Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ was and what his teachings were.

The Ḥujjah, Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ, is one of those few great leaders, very rarely born in the world. By virtue of his exemplary character, he was able to establish an ʾIsmāʿilī state in the very teeth of the bitter opposition and harsh theological storms. He was a great military leader, organizer and a devoted *dāʿi*. He had a rare ability to keep his mind fixed steadily on the distant horizon, and at the same time concentrate his whole effort on what was practically possible. In his purity and integrity, Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ was as firm as a mountain, hence his title, “The Old Man of the Mountain”.

He had a penetrating and analytical mind. Force of character, prodigious capacity for hard work and concentrated effort and firm and patient adherence to the religion which distinguished him from his contemporaries. When he decided to accomplish something, he seldom gave up its pursuit and waited patiently, sometimes for years. He was undoubtedly ambitious, but it was not personal ambition. He fought for his faith, not for his own sake. In his administrative framework he was seen to be creative, bold, courageous and possessed of strong nerves. Dr. Farhad Daftary writes in *The ʾIsmāʿilī, their History and Doctrines* (London, 1990, pp. 366-7) that: “Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ was indeed a remarkable man.”

An organizer and a political strategist of unrivalled capability, he was at the same time a thinker and writer who led an ascetic life. Several examples of his asceticism and toughness have been cited by historians. He was equally strict with friend and foe, and highly uncompromising in his austere and purely °Islāmic life style which he imposed on the whole Nizārī community, especially in Rudhbar. In particular, he insisted on the observance of the °Islāmic religious duty of: *amr bi-l-ma°ruf wa nahy °ani-l-munkar.* ”

﴿وَلَنْكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ
وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ﴾
wa-l-takun minkum °ūmmatun yad°ūna ila-l-khayri
wa ya°murūna bi-l-ma°rūfi wa yanhawna °ani-l-munkari
wa °ula°ika humu-l-muiḥḥun

“Let there arise out of you a group inviting to all that is good,
enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong.
They are the ones to attain success.”

(Sūrah °Āl °Imrān, 3:104).

During all the years spent at Alamūt, Ḥasan evidently never descended from the castle, and is said to have left his living quarters only twice, and then, to mount to his roof-top. During that period, nobody drank wine in Alamūt, and the playing of musical instruments was forbidden. Ḥasan sent his wife and daughters to Girdkuh where they lived a simple life earning their living by spinning, never having them returned to Alamūt. He also had both his sons, Ustad Ḥusayn and Muḥammad, executed. Muḥammad’s guilt was wine-drinking, while Ustad Ḥusayn had been suspected of complicity in the murder of the *dā°i*, Ḥusayn Qaini in Quhistan.

Giving an example of Ḥasan’s strictness regarding music, Charles E. Nowell writes in *The Old Man of the Mountain* that, “A man who frivolously disturbed the puritan austerity of Alamūt with flute-playing was expelled from the fortress forever.” (cf. *Speculum*, vol. xxii, no. 4, 1947, p. 502). He left no male issue behind him, the two sons he had, as referred to above, having been sentenced to death. Juvaini (p. 680) writes that, “Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ used to point to the execution of both his sons as a reason against any one’s imagining that he had exercised any personal influence on their behalf or had ever had that object in mind.”

According to *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization* (ed. by G.E. Von Grunebaum, New York, 1956), “The severity of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ against the peccadolloes of his sons is a proof of the moral discipline which reigned at Alamūt.” He had numerous opportunities to arrogate the powers of religious leadership to himself, but he always made himself subservient to the cause of the ʾImām. Once a few of his followers wrote up a genealogy for him in the usual elegant style. He, according to Marshall Hodgson in *The Order of Assassins* (Netherland, 1955, p. 51), was “said to have thrown it into the water, remarking that he would rather be the favoured servant of the ʾImām than his degenerate son.” E.G. Browne also writes in *A Literary History of Persia* (London, 1964, 2nd vol., p. 20) that Ḥasan had said, “I would rather be the chosen servant of the ʾImām than his unworthy son.” In the view of Jorunn J. Buckley, “His followers Ḥasan were called the party of the truthful, adhering to the total authority of Ḥasan as supreme teacher. Of course, the real teacher and leader was the ʾImām, who was hidden to mortal eyes. Ḥasan never sought to be recognized as the ʾImām, rather, his role was that of the *Hujjah* (الحجة) or ‘The Proof’, who demanded full obedience in the place of the ʾImām during the period of occultation. (vide *Stvdia ʾIslāmica*, Paris, LX, 1984, p. 141)

“The use of wine and intoxicants was strickly forbidden to the ʾIsmāʿīlīs,” writes John Malcolm in *The History of Persia* (London, 1815, 1st vol., p. 401) “and they were enjoined to observe the most temperate and abstemious habits.” Sayed Amir Ali also writes in *The Spirit of ʾIslām* (London, 1955, p. 340) that, “Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ himself was a strict observer of all the precepts of religion, and would not allow drunkenness or dancing or music within the circuit of his rule.” so much for the use of drugs, music and dancing girls of popular myth and disinformation. Quite the contrary.

According to *Jamiʿat Tawarikh* (p.134), “The rest of the time until his death, Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ passed inside the house, where he lived; he was occupied with reading books, committing the words of *daʿwah* to writing, and administrating the affairs of his realm. All in all he lived an ascetic, abstemious, pious and altogether simple life.”

The quarters of Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ ﷺ were a bedroom and a library. And, as we have mentioned, only two times during all the many years of his residence did he emerge from his lodgings into the open air and that was to ascend to his roof top.

Yet it was here, from his modest quarters that he supervised the stern training of his ardent young *fidā'is* (فدائيي). Attired in rough hand spun clothing, consuming simple fare, abjuring wine under penalty of death, devoting their lives to the acquisition of the physical and intellectual skills needed for the accomplishment of their missions, these *fidā'ī*¹ were intensely loyal to him.

Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ ﷺ fell ill in the month of Rabi II, 518/May, 1124. When he felt that the shadows of death were closing upon him, he summoned his lieutenant at Lamasar, Kiya Buzurg Ummīd, and designated him as the next ruler of Alamūt. He also appointed three seniors for assisting Kiya Buzurg until such time as the ʾImam ﷺ himself came to head his realm. These advisors were Didar Abu ʾĀlī Ardistanī, Ḥasan Adam Qasrani and Kiya BaJafar. Towards the end of Rabi II, 518/middle of June, 1124 at the age of 90 years Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ ﷺ, who had ruled Alamūt and other fortresses for 35 years, died. Allāh have mercy on him.



So – quite a different story than the popular myths and legends but then the history of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Alamūt has been always grossly misunderstood in a hideous form even among some Shīʿah. Most unfortunately, it is exactly about this period that we possess almost no genuine ʾIsmāʿīlī sources. Most of the extant sources have come down to us from aggressive adversarial camps, who base their information on gathering illusive bits and shreds. They seemed to take information on its face-value without trying to verify the truth. But history, as distinct from fiction, proves otherwise. Our earliest source, for instance, is the bitterly anti-ʾIsmāʿīlī text of Juvaini, who is responsible for distorting the genuine ʾIsmāʿīlī traditions. Unfortunately, the scholars follow the stories designed by Juvaini in his *Tarikh-i Jahangushay* without realizing his true attitude towards the ʾIsmāʿīlīs. W. Ivanow writes in *Alamut and Lamasar* (Tehran, 1960, p. 26) that, “There are scholars who are perfectly satisfied with what he (Juvaini) says, showing their utter ignorance.”

One of the allegations about the ʾIsmāʿīlīs is the character of the *fidāʾiyan* (the devotees), the self-sacrificing warriors; who were spoken of as advancing the dīn by terrorism and daggers and termed Assassins during the period of the Crusades by the Europeans.

1. *Fidāʾī* (فدائي) (or *fidawi*, pl. *fidaiyan*) means one who offers his/her life for a cause or sacrifices him/her self for a greater cause than individuality.

When the Crusaders spoke of the Assassins, they originally referred to the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs. Later, the term was also affixed to the Iranian ʾIsmāʿīlīs by European travellers and chroniclers. According to W. Ivanow, “This subject has been as much hackneyed, and surrounded by legends or fairy tales, as almost everything in connection with Ismailism.”

In fact Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ hated war and avoided commotion (*fiṭnah*/فتنة) that would rob him of peace and disturb his life of seclusion. He objected to unnecessary shedding of blood, but his sworn enemies insisted otherwise, so that they might thereby obtain or regain their power and kingdoms. Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ resorted to war in order to remove its root causes by cutting off the head of the snake – taking the lives of the selfish rulers. He killed a few of them in order to save Muslims from fighting each other. This was necessary and justifiable. The ʾIsmāʿīlī *fidāʾiyan* did not kill out of hatred or rancor but out of desire to save a greater number of Muslims who would otherwise have been killed in all out warfare. Bosworth writes in *The ʾIslāmīc Dynasties* (cf. *Islamic Survey*, Edinburgh, 1967, p. 128) that, “The ʾIsmāʿīlīs played a significant role in three-cornered struggle with the Franks and the Sunni Muslims. Since the ʾIsmāʿīlīs were few in number, assassination of prominent people often served as a substitute for head-on direct military action.”

We must not lose sight of the fact that the enemies of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs did not like any independent Nizāri ʾIsmāʿīlī state and reacted violently to them. They launched attacks one after another with vast overwhelming forces, accompanied by destruction of crops, cutting of fruit trees and other wrecking tools to damage the economy of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs. The general picture emerging from it suggests that the ʾIsmāʿīlīs, comparatively less able to meet the dangers hovering over them resorted to armed units of the *fidāʾi* warriors who adopted guerilla warfare for defensive purposes. Some scholars regard the ʾIsmāʿīlī struggle as a revolt, but it was much more a struggle for survival [as in Palestine today]. It was a technique where a limited number of *fidāʾiyan* sought to force a huge military machine to turn back by spreading terror in their camps, which has since been turned into myths of brutal drugged killers. W.Ivanow writes, “In proper perspective, *fidāʾiyyism* was a form of local guerilla warfare, and it would be decidedly idiotic and dishonest to see in it something like the most prominent organic feature of the ʾIsmāʿīlī doctrine, as is done by some ignorant but pretentious scholars.”

W. Montgomery Watt in his *ʿIslām and the Integration of Society* (London, 1961, p. 69) and Edward Mortimer in *Faith and Power* (London, 1982, p. 48) also admit that the method of the *fidāʿīs* was no other than that of guerilla warfare. Bernard Lewis writes in *The Assassins* (London, 1967, p. 130) that, “Ḥasan found a new way, by which a small force, disciplined and devoted, could strike effectively against the overwhelmingly superior army.”

Guerilla warfare is carried out by an irregular unit of fighters, popular to the present. The misnomer of Assassins to the ʿIsmāʿīlīs rather than guerillas by Western sources became an easy jump. Guerilla warfare is very common today and is often termed as terrorism by the (sic) Civilised World. Perhaps we should think of aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ as one of the forefathers of asymmetrical warfare.

Given all of that as background, who was Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ?

He was born in a Shiʿah family on 428/1034 at Qumm in what is now Iran but then called Persia. His father, ʿAlī bin Muḥammad bin Jaʿfar bin al-Ḥusayn bin Muḥammad bin al-Ṣabbāḥ al-Himyarī, a Kufan, originally of Yemeni origin, was a learned scholar. From an early age he acquired the rudiments of formal education from his father at home. When he was still a child, his father moved to Rayy and it was there that Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ began his religious education. In his autobiography, entitled *Sar Guzash-t-i Sayyidna* (Incidents in the Life of our Master), he tells his own story that, “From the days of my boyhood, from the age of seven, I felt a love for the various branches of learning and wished to become a religious scholar; until the age of seventeen I was a seeker and searcher for knowledge, but kept to the Twelver faith of my father.” He was intelligent and also proficient in geometry and astronomy as well as religion. He learned the ʿIsmāʿīlī doctrines from a Fāṭimid *dāʿī* (داعی), Amir Dḥarrab, who taught him the doctrines of the ʿIsmāʿīlīs. Soon he was reading ʿIsmāʿīlī literature, which so stirred him that when he became dangerously ill, he began to fear that he might die without ever knowing the real truth.

When he recovered, he approached an ʿIsmāʿīlī for further clarification of the doctrines. Convinced that ʿIsmāʿīlī teachings represented ultimate reality, he formally embraced ʿIsmāʿīlism at the age of thirty-five in 464/1071 and afterwards, he came into contact with another Fāṭimid *dāʿī*, ʿAbdu-l-Mālik bin Attash in Ispahan from whom he received further teachings.

Hasan aṣ-Ṣabbāh ﷺ writes further in *Sar Guzasht-i Sayyidna* that, “In the year 464/1071 °Abdu-l-Mālik bin Attash, who at that time was the *dāʿi* in al-°Iraq, came to Rayy. I met with his approval, and he made me a deputy *dāʿi* and indicated that I should go to see the °Imām in Egypt, who at that time was al-Mustanṣir. In the year 469/1077, I went to Ispahan in 467/1074 on my way to Egypt with the purpose of meeting in Cairo, al-Muʿayyad fi-d-Din aṣh-Shirazī ﷺ who at the time was the chief *dāʿi* (*al-dāʿi al-muṭlaq*/الداعي المطلق) or “the absolute or unrestricted caller” at Cairo and the teacher of Naṣir al-Khusro. He finally arrived in Egypt in the year 471/1078.”

He travelled at first to northern Azerbaijan, thence to Mayyafariqin, where he held religious deliberations with the Sunni theologians and denied the right of Sunni muftis to interpret religion, that being the prerogative of the °Imām ﷺ. As a result, he was expelled by the town’s Sunni magistrate (*qāḍī*/قاضي). He went on to Mosul, Rahba and Damascus. He sailed by coastal trader from Beirut to Sidon, Tyre, Acre, Caesarea and finally reached Cairo in 471/1078. °Imām al-Mustanṣir (المستنصر) gave him audience and honored him. Hasan ﷺ asked him as to who would be the °Imām after him. al-Mustanṣir replied that it would be his son Nizār (نزار). He is reported to have stayed 18 months in Cairo, enjoying the patronage and favor of the °Imām ﷺ. He also learnt the latest tactics of the *daʿwah* at Dar al-Hikmah, which was in those days the biggest learning centre of °Islām. Hasan ﷺ, thus profited much by his journey to Egypt. It is possible that he had a meeting also with °Imām al-Nizār in Cairo.

Laurence Lockhart writes in *Hasan-i Sabbah and the Assassins* (BSOAS, vol. v, 1928, p. 677) that, “Hasan was well received at Cairo, and was treated with marked favor by the Fāṭimid Imam al-Mustanṣir. It is said by some writers that Hasan received so many benefits at the hands of the Imam that the courtiers became jealous, and eventually forced him to leave the country.” Baḍr al-Jamālī, the Fāṭimid *wazīr* (وزير) and one of the leaders of the opposition to al-Nizār bin al-Mustanṣir was attempting to displace al-Nizār, when he came aware that Hasan was a supporter of al-Nizār, and imprisoned him in the fortress of Dumyat in Alexandria. The strong walls of the fortress collapsed one day [some others say it was the minaret], enabling Hasan to escape. He subsequently boarded a vessel at Alexandria with a group of Franks for western waters, but the stormy winds tossed the vessel northward to the shores of aṣh-Shām where he disembarked at the port of °Akrā in Palestine.

After that Ḥasan toured many cities where he studied the economic, social and religious conditions of the people. He returned back to Ispahan in 473/1081 and began to propagate the ʾIsmāʿīlī faith in Yazd and Kirman for a while. He spent three months in Kḥuzistan before proceeding to Damghān, where he stayed another three years.

There was plenty of *daʿwah* activity, going on throughout the length and breadth of Iran (Persia) which was under the control of ʿAbdu-l-Mālik bin Attash. In about 480/1088, Ḥasan ﷺ seems to have chosen the remote castle of Alamūt in Daylam as the base of his mission. He sent from Damghān, and later, from Shahriyarkuh, a number of trained *duʿāt* (دعاة), including Ismail Qazwinī, Kiya Abul Kassim Larijani and Muḥammad Jamal Radi to different districts around the Alamūt valley to convert local inhabitants. Ḥasan ﷺ at length was appointed the chief *dāʿi* of Daylam.

In the meantime, the Seljukid *wazīr*, Nizām al-Mulk (408-485/1018-1092), a well known implacable foe, ordered ʾAbū Muslim, the governor of Rayy, to arrest him but, Ḥasan ﷺ managed to escape to Daylam in hiding. He then reached Qazwin (also called Qasbin or Qashwin), where he inspected the fort of Alamūt in Rudhbar. He remained in worship within the fortress, and also converted the local people. He took possession of the fortress of Alamūt in 483/1090 and established an independent Nizārī ʾIsmāʿīlī state, or more accurately, a temporary autonomous zone (TAZ).

We must not lose sight of the fact that the enemies of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs did not like the idea of independent Nizārī ʾIsmāʿīlī *states* even if it was only a group of unconnected strategic strongholds throughout Iran (Persia) and Syria, and reacted violently to them. They launched attacks one after another with vast overwhelming forces, accompanied by destruction of crops, cutting of fruit trees and burning crops to damage the economy of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs in the area. The general picture emerging from it suggests that the ʾIsmāʿīlīs, who were fewer in number and unable to meet the danger hovering upon them, formed and trained armed units of *fidāʿi* warriors who adopted methods of guerilla warfare for *defensive* purposes. Some scholars regard the ʾIsmāʿīlī struggle as a revolt, but it was actually a struggle for survival. It was a technique, we mentioned earlier, of the use of limited warriors to force a prodigious overwhelming military machine to turn back by spreading chaos or terror in their camps, which has since been woven inimically into fictions but in actuality was exactly what asymmetrical warfare is in the present.

The Nizāri ʾIsmāʿīlīs, a seminal branch of Shīʿah ʾIslām, were designated with the misnomer – *Assassins* – in mediaeval Europe. This is an abusive term that had been given a wide currency by the Crusaders and their occidental chroniclers, who had first come into contact with the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs in the Near East during the early decades of the 12th century. Charles E. Nowell writes in *The Old Man of the Mountain* that, “In the early years of the twelfth century, as the Christians spread their conquests in the Holy Lands and Syria, they made the acquaintance of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs. Many of their historians had something to say about the sect, but what they put forth was usually a mixture of information and misinformation.”

The ʾIsmāʿīlīs were not a band of terrorists, but their fighting against their oppressors was a struggle for survival. Medieval Europeans, who remained absolutely ignorant of Muslim beliefs and practices, had transmitted a number of tales, and produced perverted images of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs. Rene Dussaud, one of the very few Europeans who have appreciated the good points of this remarkable sect writes in *Histoire et Religion des Nosaires* (Paris, 1900) that, “The verdict pronounced by western scholars is marked by an excessive severity. It is certainly wrong to confound, as even some Musulman doctors do, the ʾIsmāʿīlīs in one common reprobation. The Old Man of the Mountain himself was not so black as it is the custom to paint him.” In more recent times, too, many western scholars have continued to apply the ill-conceived term *Assassins* to the Nizāri ʾIsmāʿīlīs without being aware either of its etymology or dubious origin. Paul E. Walker makes his comments in his *Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary* (London, 1996) that, “Until recently, however, the ʾIsmāʿīlīs were studied and judged almost exclusively on the basis of the evidence collected or fabricated by their enemies, including the bulk of the medieval Sunni heresiographers and polemicists who were hostile towards the Shīʿah in general and the ʾIsmāʿīlīs among them in particular. These Sunni authors in fact treated Shīʿah interpretations of ʾIslām as expressions of heterodoxy or even heresy. As a result, a ‘black legend’ was gradually developed and put into circulation in the Muslim world to discredit the ʾIsmāʿīlīs and their understanding of ʾIslām. The Christian Crusaders, and their occidental chroniclers, who remained almost completely ignorant of ʾIslām and its internal divisions, disseminated their own myths about the ʾIsmāʿīlīs.

These came to be accepted in the West as true descriptions of ʾIsmāʿīlī teachings and practices. Modern orientalist, too, have for the most part studied the ʾIsmāʿīlīs on the basis of hostile Sunni sources and fanciful European accounts of medieval times. Thus, legends and misconceptions have continued to surround the ʾIsmāʿīlīs throughout the twentieth century and into the present.

Benjamin of Tudela, the Spanish Rabbi of 12th century, who was the first European traveller to approach the frontiers of China (between 1159 and 1173) is one of the early Europeans to have written about the ʾIsmāʿīlīs. He visited Syria in 562/1167, and described in his *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (tr. by Marcus N. Adler, London, 1907) the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs under the term of *hashīshin*. The next extant description is found in a diplomatic report of 570/1175 of Burchard, an envoy sent to Egypt and Syria by the Roman emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1152-1190), in which he has used the word *Heyssessini* (in Roman, *seignors de montana*) for the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Syria. William (1130-1185), archbishop of Tyre, is the first historian of the Crusades to have described the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Syria in 581/1186 with the name *Assissini* in his *History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea* (tr. by Babcock and Krey, New York, 1943, 2nd vol., p. 390), but also admits that he does not know the origin of this name, but by no means states that it was unknown to the Muslims.

The German historian, Arnold of Lubeck (d. 610/1212) used for the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Syria the term *Heissessin* in his *Chronica Slavorum* (1869, 21st. vol., p. 240). James of Vitry, the Bishop of ʾAkrā (from 1216 to 1228), was perhaps the best informed occidental observer of Muslim affairs after William of Tyre. He produced his *Secret Societies of the Middle Ages* (London, 1846), wherein he applied the term *Assasini* for the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs. William of Rubruck (1215-1295), who had completed his visit of China in 653/1255, seems to have been amongst the first Europeans to have designated the Iranian ʾIsmāʿīlīs as *Axasins* and *Hacsasins*, hitherto used only for the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs. The eminent French chronicler, Jean de Joinville (1224-1317) produced a most valuable *Histoire de Saint Louis*, (comp. 1305) relates the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlī ambassadors, who had come to see King Louis IX (1226-1270) at Acre. Joinville referred to the term *Assacis* for the ʾIsmāʿīlīs. Marco Polo (1254-1324) has also used the word *Ashishin* in his travelogue.

Different etymologies of the modern word *Assassins* are given in the occidental sources, such as *Accini*, *Arsasini*, *Assassi*, *Assassini*, *Assessini*, *Assessini*, *Assissini*, *Heyssessini* etc. Thomas Hyde in *Veterum Persarum Religionis Historia* (Oxford, 1700, p. 493) opines that the word *Assassin* must be the word *hassas*, derived from the root *hassa*, meaning, to kill or exterminate. This opinion was followed by Menage and Falconet. De Volney also adopted this etymology in his *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie* (1st. vol., p. 404) without citing any evidence. Historian °Abu-l-Fidā (d. 732/1331) writes that Masiyaf, a town that was the headquarters of the Syrian °Ismā°ilīs, is situated on a mountain, called Jabal Assikkin (*Jabal as-Sikkīn*). (جبل السكين) The word *sikkīn* means knife or dagger, and the name of this mountain may thus mean, “the mountain of the knife.” This seems to be some analogy of the coinage of the above westerners, reflecting the view in Falconet’s *Memoires de l’Academie des Inscriptions* (17th vol., p. 163); who called it, *la montagne du Poignard* (mountain of the dagger). Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) however suggests that *sekkīn* in this case is the name of a man, so that we should translate it (*la montagne de Sekkin*) or the Sekkin’s Mountain. Michel Sabbagh of Acre suggests the origin of is al-Sisani or al-Sasani, meaning the family of Sasan. A term used by Arabs to indicate an adventurer.

Simon Assemani (1752-1821), the professor of oriental languages in Padua, used the word *Assissana* in his *Giornale dell’ Italiana Letteratura* (1806, pp. 241-262), and according to him, it is a corrupt form of *Assissani* in connection with the Arabic word *assissath* (*as-sisah*), meaning rock or fortress, and as such, *Assissani* (*as-sisani*) refers to one who dwells in a rocky fortress.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the name *Assassin* received a good deal of attention from western scholars, who produced a flood of theories to explain its origin and significance. The mystery was finally seems to have solved by Silvestre de Sacy, who discovered that the word *Assassin* was ḥaṣḥīṣhiyya, i.e., the users of ḥaṣḥīṣh.

The Sunni Muslims, having exhausted all their resources of condemnation, now resorted to designate the Syrian °Ismā°ilīs by different religious terms, such as Bāṭiniyya and the Ta°limiyya or Rafidis, Mufaddzila, Zanadiq, Munafiq by their enemies. Oddly less frequently, the °Ismā°ilīs of Syria were called by another abusive term, such as ḥaṣḥīṣhiyya, i.e., the users of ḥaṣḥīṣh.

It seems that the oppressors had failed in their attempt to extirpate the ʾIsmāʿīlīs and eventually made a last vehement strike on them.

The earliest reported application of the term *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah* to the ʾIsmāʿīlīs occurs in the anti-ʾIsmāʿīlī polemical epistle issued in 517/1123 by the then Fatimid regime in Cairo on behalf of the caliph al-Amir (d. 524/1130), entitled *Iqwa Sawāʾīqa al-irgham*. This epistle contains the term *ḥaṣḥīshīyya* for the Syrian Nizārī ʾIsmāʿīlīs for two times, *vide* pp. 27 and 32. It must be known that the well-known event of qiyamāt celebrated at Alamūt in 559/1164 became the main tool of the enemies of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs to discredit them. The orthodox Muslims waged a bitter propaganda war and uttered every possible abusive term for the ʾIsmāʿīlīs.

The dead term *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah* once again was given a life, and it came to be used almost for the first time in the Seljuqid literature.

The earliest known Seljuqid chronicle is *Nuṣratu-l-Fatrah wa Uṣratu-l-Fatrah* (578/1183) by ʾImādudīn Muḥammad al-Kātib Ispahanī (d. 597/1201), which is now extant only in an abridged version compiled by Fateh ʿAlī bin Muḥammad al-Bundarī in 623/1226, entitled *Zubdatu-n-Naṣrah wa Nakḥbatu-l-Uṣrah* (pp. 169, 195). ʾImādudīn begins his chronicle from 485/1092, and did not put his work into its final form until 578/1183 when he had already been in Syria for 15 years. He seems to be the first Seljuqid writer to have used the term, *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah*, for the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs. Ibn Muyassar (d. 677/1278) simply states in his *Tarikh-i Misr* (p. 102) that in Syria, the ʾIsmāʿīlīs are called *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah*, in Alamūt; they are known as Bāṭiniyya and Malahida; in Khorasan as *Taʿlimiyyah*. ʾAbū Shama (d. 665/1267) also used *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah* for the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs in his *Kitab al-Rawdatayn fī Akhbar al-Dawlatayn* (1st. vol., pp. 240 and 258). Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) writing after 13th century, mentions in *Muqaddima* (1st. vol., p. 143) that the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Syria, once called as *al-ḥaṣḥīshīyyah al-ʾIsmāʿīliyya*, were known in his time as the *Fidāʿwiyya*. It seems that the term *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah* was commonly applied for the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs between the 11th and 12th centuries by Sunni Muslims, and has not ceased to be used since the 13th century.

It however must bear in mind that Juvaini and Rashīdu-d-dīn do not use the term *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah* for the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Iran, as the term was not prevalent during their time in Iran and never was applied to the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Iran.

W. Madelung has however recently discovered in his Arabic Texts *Concerning the History of the Zaydi Imams of Tabaristan, Daylaman and Gilan* (Beirut, 1987, pp. 146 & 329) that the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Iran too were named ḥaṣḥīshiyya in some contemporary Zaydī (الزيدية) sources compiled in the Arabic language in the Caspian region during the first half of the 13th century. The Zaydī Shiʿah were the closest rivals of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs in northern Iran and had prolonged military confrontations with them in the Caspian region, had launched their own anti-ʾIsmāʿīlī smear campaign. This tends to reveal that these Arabian sources had referred to the Iranian ʾIsmāʿīlīs under the misnomer prevalent in their region for the Syrian ʾIsmāʿīlīs.

Ḥaṣḥīṣh or ḥaṣḥīsha is the Arabic word for hemp, which is latinized *cannabis sativa*. Its variety is Indian hemp or *cannabis indica*, have been known and used in the Near East since ancient times as a drug with both healing and intoxicating effects. The earliest specific mention of the word ḥaṣḥīṣh was contained in *at-Tadhkirah fi-l-Khilaf* by Abū ʾIshāq aṣh-Ṣhīrazī (d. 476/1083). The use of ḥaṣḥīṣh grew in Syria, Egypt and other Muslim countries during 12th and 13th centuries among the lower strata of society. Numerous tracts were compiled by Muslim authors, describing that the use of ḥaṣḥīṣh would effect on the users' morality and religion. Consequently, the users of ḥaṣḥīṣh qualified for a lesser social and moral status, similar to that of a *mulḥid* (ملحد), or heretic in religion. Importantly neither the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Syria nor the contemporary non-ʾIsmāʿīlī Muslim texts, which were harsh on ʾIsmāʿīlīs, ever attested to the use of ḥaṣḥīṣh among the Nizārī ʾIsmāʿīlīs.

Ḥaṣḥīṣh was in common usage in Sufic orbits in Damascus since the 11th century, and it was subjected to the disapproval of the ʿulemaʾ. Franz Rosenthal writes in *The Herb: Ḥaṣḥīṣh vs. Medieval Muslim Society* (Leiden, 1971, p. 53) that, "The use of ḥaṣḥīṣh by Sufi fraternities and their presumably large role in the spread of ḥaṣḥīṣh use can be accepted as a fact in view of all the later evidence pointing in this direction." The Sufi initiates were called *ḥaṣḥīshiyyah*, and the herb was commonly known among them as *ḥaṣḥīṣh al-Fuqarah* (the herb of the faqirs or the 'poor'). Among them, the other titles for ḥaṣḥīṣh were "digester of food" (*hadīm al-ʾaqwāt*), "rouser of thought" (*baithat al-fikr*), "queen of insanity" (*sultanat al-junūn*), and "the green one" (*al-akhḍar*).

Nuruddin Ali bin al-Jazzar writes in his *Qam al-Washin fi dhamm al-barrashin* (comp. before 991/1583) that the accursed ḥaṣḥīsh “was originated by some group around the 500’s” (*ahdathaha baʿd fiʿah fi nahw qarn al-khams miʿah*). According to Franz Rosenthal, “The word *fiʿah* (group) is used here for the sake of the rhyme and thus may very well mean Sufis or Shīʿah rather than sectarians or soldiers.” (Ibid. pp. 53-4) Thus, it seems possible that ḥaṣḥīsh had been discovered around 500/1106 by the wandering Ṣūfīs, who qualified for the title of *mulhid*, or heretic in religion, and the term ḥaṣḥīshiyya became a common abuse in “polite” society.

In short we could say that just as the scholars and other members of polite “society” condemned the ʾIsmāʿīlīs, the Shīʿah and the Ṣūfīs for their religious outlook they had not found a label to paste over them which put them completely beyond the pale and condemned them to heresy on account of their supposed use of hemp.

The Turkish poet, Fuzūlī (885-963/1480-1556) writes in his poem, *Layla wa Majnūn* (p. 167) that, in spite of its being condemned, “ḥaṣḥīsh can claim to be the friend of dervishes and is available in the corner of every mosque and among all kinds of scholars.”

Even someone as respectable as ʾIbn Kathīr (13th vol., p. 314) quotes the following verses:-

“Ḥaṣḥīsh contains the meaning of my desire.

You dear people of intelligence and understanding.

They have declared it forbidden without any justification
on the basis of reason and tradition.

Declaring forbidden what is not forbidden is forbidden.”

Be that as it may ḥaṣḥīsh had been rigorously condemned. Ibn aṣh-Shihnah (d. 815/1412) composed a couple of verses that:-

“I am surprised to find a Shāykh who commands people to be pious
but himself never heeds the Merciful One
or shows piety towards Him.

He considers it permissible to eat ḥaṣḥīsh as well as ribā (usury).

And (says that) he who studies the ṣaḥīḥ is a heretic.”

Muslim jurists in general also condemned the use of ḥaṣḥīsh and demanded severe punishment for its use, declaring it to be dangerous to ʾIslām and society. Gradually and accordingly, the word *ḥaṣḥīshiyyah* became an abusive term especially in Syria.

One who was hated or was suspicious was branded as *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah* in the society so both the Syrian and Nizārī °Ismā'īlīs were labelled with the same mis-nomer by their enemies and Westerners.

Running parallel with this, it is worth keeping in mind that the Syrian °Ismā'īlīs also called themselves *ṣafī* (صفي) from as *aṣ-ṣufat* (the pure, or sincere), resembling the term *ṣūfī*. According to *Bustan al-Jami* (comp. 561/1165), the °Ismā'īlīs in Syria called themselves as *aṣ-Ṣufāt*. Ibn al-Azim (d. 660/1262) however writes in his *Zubdat al-Halab* (comp. 641/1243) that only a faction of the Syrian °Ismā'īlīs at Jabal as-Summuq called themselves *aṣ-Ṣufāt*.

Both °Ismā'īlism and Sufism are similar in a way, and it is generally understood that, 'while every °Ismā'īlī is a Ṣūfī not every Ṣūfī is an °Ismā'īlī'. °Ismā'īlism is an esoteric *ṭarīqah* (طريقة) as well as a social system with its own rules and characteristics, while Ṣūfism is an individual concern. The °Ismā'īlīs however never allowed themselves to be submerged totally into the general esoteric medley, and their form of Ṣūfism remained quite distinctive from other mystical orders of °Islām. The °Ismā'īlīs were the main target of the Sunni Muslims, who used all misnomers and abusive words to discredit them as well as the Ṣūfīs. Incorporating the °Ismā'īlīs with the Ṣūfīs due to their potential affinity, the extreme Sunni Muslims (Salafis, Wahhabis, Takfiris, Ikḥwanis etc) and others extremists designate the °Ismā'īlīs by the same term. Franz Rosenthal writes, "It is worthy of note that attacks on the °Ismā'īlīs accusing them of being ḥaṣḥīsh eaters were apparently not made very often, although this would have been an effective verbal slur." (op. cit., p. 43) Paul Johnson writes in his *Civilizations of the Holy Land* (London, 1979, p. 211) that, "Much nonsense has been written about this sect, which had nothing to do with ḥaṣḥīsh." Curiously enough, the term seems to have become so specific for the Syrian °Ismā'īlīs that the Ṣūfī circles using ḥaṣḥīsh were ignored. After the schism of Nizārī (نزاری) and Musta'li (المستعلي), the influence of the Musta'lians in aṣḥ-Shām (بلاد الشام) was less than the Nizāris, and therefore, the Musta'lian faction also shifted this misnomer onto the rival group. It is not surprising that when people cannot find the solution of a difficulty in the natural manner, they concoct a supernatural explanation, just as when they like or dislike a thing, they go to extremes, invent and contrive superstitious tales and give vent to credulous stories tinged with different misnomers.

The Musta^ʿlian group was designated by the Nizāri ʾIsmā^ʿīlīs in aṣḥ-Shām as Jam^ʿat al-Amiriyya, and the latter were labelled by the former as Jamat al-ḥaṣḥiṣhiyyah as the Musta^ʿlian group did not like the rival group be known as Jam^ʿat al-Nizāria. Soon afterwards, the Musta^ʿlian group almost disappeared from aṣḥ-Shām by 524/1130, but left behind the name ḥaṣḥiṣhiyya, and in this way, it became general usage defining ʾIsmā^ʿīlīs in aṣḥ-Shām ever since.

Given all that what then, it can rightly be asked, is the reason why the ʾIsmā^ʿīlīs or Bāṭinis were called *ḥaṣḥiṣhin*.”

I apologize to the reader for going on so long about this but it is crucial to understand why this term of opprobrium was linked especially to the Nizāri ʾIsmā^ʿīlīs when, as we have seen, they were in general, intolerant of all forms of intoxicants. It is simply another myth along with the lurid stories about women and gardens that has been proven to be a figment of the mainly Western and Orientalist imagination as archeologists have never found any remains of such gardens or evidence for them in the lands of the Nizāri ʾIsmā^ʿīlīs.

It is also important to understand all of this in light of our next section on the *qiyamātt-i qubra* or *qaim al-qiyamāt* the occasion observed in Alamūt on 17 Ramaḍān, 559/August 8, 1164 when ʾImām Ḥasan II came out publicly to terminate the *dawr-i saṭr*. This action, radical as it was (and is), has often been explained to be the result of his being intoxicated by his use of ḥaṣḥiṣh. It was something else.

After picking up the word *ḥaṣḥiṣhiyyah* for the ʾIsmā^ʿīlīs, the Crusaders went on to further fabrications. The daring behavior of the ʾIsmā^ʿīlī *fidāʿis*, who usually carried out their mission – a struggle for survival – had greatly impressed the Crusaders, who would rarely endanger their own lives for other than worldly rewards.

Indeed the Crusaders failed to compete with the valor of the ʾIsmā^ʿīlī *fidāʿis* fighting and forgot to understand that the state brought about by ḥaṣḥiṣh consists, for the most part, as a kind of quiet ecstasy; not at all the zealous vigor and fervor apt to fire the courage to undertake and carry out daring and dangerous missions.

Franz Rosenthal writes in *The Herb: Ḥaṣḥiṣh versus Medieval Muslim Society* (Leiden, 1971, pp. 42-3) that, “It has been pointed out that ḥaṣḥiṣh does not have the properties that would ordinarily make it a serviceable stimulant for anyone being sent on a dangerous mission of assassination.”

The editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* write in *The Arabs* (New York, 1978, p. 94) that, “Stories of the terrorists’ use of ḥaṣḥīsh before setting out to commit murder and face martyrdom are doubtful.” Bosworth also writes in *The ʿIslāmic Dynasties* (cf. ʿIslāmic Survey, series no. 5, Edinburgh, 1967, p. 128) that, “The story related by Marco Polo and others, that hallucinatory drugs were used to stimulate the assassins to bolder efforts is unconfirmed in any of the genuine Ismāʿīlī sources.” The Muslim authors, unlike the western authors, did not fantasize about the real spirit of sacrifice of the *fidāʿis* in defending their faith in an aggressive environment. Instead of understanding their defensive struggle, they simply branded them with the then prevalent abusive term, *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah*.

Hence, the misnomer *ḥaṣḥīshīyyah*, picked up by the Crusaders in the beginning of the second half of the 12th century, mainly through oral hearsay, was coloured by spurious and extravagant fables, smacking of exaggeration in western popular lore and literature.

Thus, in the West, the ʿIsmāʿīlīs have been the subjects of rag bags of legends, and were portrayed in different terms, so as to designate them ultimately as Assassins. Farhad Daftary writes in *The Assassin Legends* (London, 1994, p. 84) that, “In sum, mediaeval Europeans learned very little about ʿIslām and Muslims, and their less informed knowledge of the ʿIsmāʿīlīs found expression in a few superficial observations and erroneous perceptions scattered in Crusader histories and other occidental sources.”



The Legends of a Worldly Paradise

From a critical and analytical approach to the sources, it is quite easy to ascertain that the fortress of Alamūt was situated in a rocky, infertile region, and its physical condition was, and is, very much dry, rough and coarse. There were also swamps and muddy tracts in hollows accounting for an unhealthy atmosphere. Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ on taking over the Alamūt immediately embarked on the task of renovating the castle, which was in great need of repairs, improving its fortifications, storage facilities and water supply sources.

He also improved and greatly extended the system of irrigation and cultivation of crops in the Alamūt valley beneath the fort, where he had many trees planted. Thus, in time, a fertile spot emerged in the barren ranges of the mountains. These fertile tracts of the valley began to appear to be as if they were oases in the surrounding desert.

Whenever the Alamūt was threatened, enemies had to come from Ispahan to Rudhbar where they passed through the tedious and barren regions until they could make their camps in the pastures of Alamūt. While retreating, the frustrated forces took their revenge by mutilating and cutting down the luxuriant crops and devastated the smiling fields in order to quench their thirst for hatred and passion. After retreating they told romantic stories to cover their defeats. Firstly, it was rumoured that the valley of Alamūt had been transformed into the gardens of paradise, but this proved an ineffectual story among the local people. Instead, the enemies contrived another florid story that the so called paradise now existed *inside* the fortress. Since it was difficult to ascertain this story from local people, it began to receive credence in some quarters, when bits and shreds were turned by later writers into a tale of exaggeration and were then even further embellished. Thus, the failure militarily to eliminate the ʾIsmāʿīlīs, begot in its turn the war of myths and tales. Round this has thus grown up a crop of fables, making a curious hodgepodge. According to *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (London, 1958, 2nd vol., p. 140), “Hasan bin Sabbah caused the land surrounding his fortress to be carefully cultivated, and this may have led to the legends of a worldly or earthly paradise.”

But it was the Venetian traveller Marco Polo (1254-1324) who, accompanied by his father and uncle and embarked on his journey to the court of Kubilai Khan (1260-1294) who was a real myth maker. Marco Polo started from ʾAkrā in 1271 and passed through Iran in 1272, about 15 years after the destruction of Alamūt when it was mainly a heap of ruins. He committed his itinerary to writing through a scribe in 1298 and related in his book fantastic tales that he had heard from neighboring people in Iran concerning the tale of paradise in Alamūt but, in fact, he *never* visited Alamūt himself.

He admits in his book that his account is not based on personal observation. It also cannot be denied that Marco Polo's account bears a distinctly Western imprint, reflecting the influences of different reports which are ultimately traceable back to Burchard of Strassburg, Arnold of Lubeck and James of Vitry. It is therefore possible that Marco Polo had knowingly conflated and emroidered the information he had acquired some 30 years earlier in Iran, with the legends then prevalent in Europe concerning the ʾIsmāʿīlīs of Syria. In conclusion Marco Polo could not have heard his account in its entirety from his informants in Iran but succumbed to myth.

It would be interesting here to quote the description of Marco Polo about the secret garden of paradise in Alamūt. He narrates:

“So he had fashioned it after the description that Mahomet gave of his paradise, to wit, that it should be a beautiful garden running with conduits of wine and milk and honey and water, and full of lovely women for the delectation of all its inmates ... he kept at his court a number of the youths of the country, from 12 to 20 years of age, such as had a taste for soldiering, and to these he used to tell tales about paradise, just as Mahomet had been wont to do, and they believed in him just as the Saracens believe in Mahomet. The prince would then ask whence he came, and he would reply that he came from paradise! And that it was exactly such as Mahomet had described it in the law.”

It is important to bear in mind that it was the tendency of the Western sources to say that the Qurʾān was **not** in any way a divinely revealed book, but rather it was made up by the Prophet ﷺ. Whatever the misconception of ʾIslām that was popular in Europe at that time is evidently echoing in the narration of Marco Polo.

The Qurʾān was translated for the first time from Arabic into Latin. by Peter de Cluny (d. 551/1156) and Robert of Ketton also produced a Latin translation of Qurʾān in 538/1143 followed by the translation of Mark of Toledo (1190-1200) under the title of *Al-Corani Machomati Liber*. Joinville and Pedro de Alfonso and others followed them in the 12th century. All the translators dwelt laciviously, extensively and polemically on the hedonistic delights of the ʾIslāmic garden of paradise. Alfonso’s account became very popular, and was treated, according to *ʾIslām and the West* (Edinburg, 1960, p. 148) by Norman Daniel, as “the standard mediaeval version of the Qurʾān’s promised paradise, that is, a garden of delights, flowing waters, mild air in which neither heat nor cold could afflict, shady trees, fruits, many-coloured silken clothing and palaces of precious stones and metals, the milk and wine served in gold and silver vessels by angels, saying, ‘eat and drink in joy’; and beautiful virgins, ‘untouched by men or demons’.”

The most famous writers in Europe who produced colourful tales of the ʾIslāmic garden of paradise were Pedro de Alfonso, San Pedro, Marino Sanudo, Varagine, Higden, Simon Simeon, Ricoldo da Monte Croce, William of Tripoli, John Mandeville, Jacques de Vitry, Alan of Lille, Sigebert, Guido, and others.

In time, the European conceptions of an °Islāmic paradise, based on the Qur°ānic description in a literal sense, were incorporated into the myth of an alleged paradise in Alaūūt, culminating finally in Marco Polo's detailed 'account' to this effect.

Farhad Daftary also writes in *The Assassin Legends* (London, 1994, p. 116) that, "This garden, not found in any earlier European source before Marco Polo, was essentially modelled on the Qur°ānic description of paradise then available."

Thus, Marco Polo gave and enhanced a further lease of life to the anti-°Ismā°ilī propaganda in Europe. Later on, the account of Friar Odoric of Pordenous (d. 731/1331), who visited China during 1323-27, is perhaps the earliest occidental account of the °Ismā°ilīs, based entirely on Marco Polo. On his homeland journey to Italy in 1328. Odoric passed through the Caspian coast land in northern Iran, where he heard about the °Ismā°ilīs. His description almost exactly resembles the account of Marco Polo. Charles E. Nowell writes in *The Old Man of the Mountain* (cf. *Speculum*, Mass., October, 1947, vol., 12, no. 4, pp. 517-8) that, "It is easy to understand how some parts of the Marco-Odoric legend were started. Various eastern historians say that the original Old Man, Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ, for purely economic and strategic reasons, had conduits built and encouraged planting around Alamūt. This give rise to the stories of gardens and fountains of wine, milk and honey."

Mirza Muhammad Saeed Dehlvi writes in *Mazhab aur Batini Talim* (Lahore, 1935, pp.296-7) that, "Whenever, the villagers looked the view of the beautiful gardens, green fields and heaths from the surrounding walls of Alamūt, they thought it a model of a paradise of the Nizāri °Ismā°ilīs on the ranges of the mountain."

It is more than possible that the legend of paradise must have been originated by the illiterate and narrow-minded villagers from whom Marco Polo had heard and recorded it during his journey. It is also a striking feature that not a single Muslim source, not even Ata Mālik Juvaini who was very aggressive in his narratives and was always in search of such stories to use against the °Ismā°ilīs, had ever mentioned the legend of a garden of paradise at Alamūt.

Marshall Hodgson writes in the *The Order of the Assassins* (Netherland, 1955, p.135) that, "Juvaini, when investigating the history of Alamut on the spot after its fall, did not find any such a garden as Polo heard tell of."

Farhad Daftary also writes in *The Assassin Legends* (London, 1994, pp. 114-5) that, “The watchful Juwaynī, who visited Alamūt in 1256 shortly before that fortress was partially demolished by the Mongols, did not find any sign of Marco Polo’s gardens there; nor is the existence of any such ʿIsmāʿilī garden in Persia attested by Rashīd ad-Dīn or any other Muslim source. However, Juwaynī was greatly impressed by the water conduits, cisterns and storage facilities which he *did* find at Alamūt.”

The modern scholars express great doubts as to the historicity of the stories of paradise narrated by Marco Polo. Brockelmann writes in *History of the ʿIslāmīc Peoples* (London, 1959, p. 179) that, “What the Venetian world traveller Marco Polo reported, who some two hundred years later (1271 or 1272) passed through the territory of Alamut, may be a mere legend.” Dr. Abbas Hamadani writes in *The Fatimids* (Karachi 1962, pp. 50-51) that, “A myth was circulated in much later times to the effect that Ḥasan used to give ḥaṣḥīṣḥ, an intoxicating drug, to his followers, and in their state of unconsciousness they were transferred to a false paradise. The legend of paradise was circulated by the European traveller Marco Polo, and it is obviously false.” Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi writes in *Iran – Royalty, Religion and Revolution* (Canberra, 1980, p. 72) that, “The romantic stories of the order of assassins and of the Old Man of the Mountain are familiar to Western readers through the pages of Marco Polo, but the legends surrounding events in Alamūt, although fascinating, are far from truth.” According to *The Arabs* (by the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, New York, 1978, p. 94), “Stories of the terrorists use of ḥaṣḥīṣḥ before setting out to commit murder and face martyrdom are doubtful, and there is no ʿIsmāʿilī source to confirm tales of an artificial paradise into which drugged members were taken as a foretaste of eternal bliss.” Duncan Forbes also writes in *The Heart of Iran* (London, 1963, p. 29) that, “It is difficult to believe that the Alamūt valley, austere and rocky as it is today, ever contained the delicate gardens described in the Middle Ages.” Lastly, in falsifying the tale of paradise, William Marsdon writes in *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London, 1818, p. 117) that, “We may affect to smile at his (Marco Polo’s) credulity.” With this in mind we may now dismiss the garden stories along with the ḥaṣḥīṣḥ stoiries which leaves one more story to deal with before reaching the declaration of the *qiyamāt* by Ḥasan II.

First it must be understood that a less informed ʾIsmāʿīlī historian, called Dehkhoda Abdul Malik bin Ali, who was appointed the commander of the fortress, and who later on became known as the Maimundiz in Rabi I, 520/April, 1126; gives a few important details of the year 536/1142, cited in Rashiduddin's *Jamiʿat Tawārikh* (ed. B. Karimi, Tehran, 1959, pp. 149-163), and Abul Kassim Kashani's *Zubdat at-Tawarikh* (ed. M.T. Danishpazhuh, 1964, pp. 171-4) concerning the Khurramiya, a sect of the Kaysania, who had greatly borrowed from the teachings of the Mazdakites and Zoroastrians. Khurramiya refers to a whole wide movement which operated throughout Iran, with a possible focus in Azerbaijan and Tabaristan. The very meaning of Khurramiya appears uncertain. It is usually related to the meaning of the Iranian term *khurram* (joyful, delightful or pleasing/خـــرم) so as to stigmatise the movement as "licentious" and justify its dependence on Mazdakism, which was considered as too tolerant from the point of view of ethics. This dependence, however, was occasionally related to Mazdak's wife, Khurrama, held to have given her name to Mazda's followers after his death. There is also a geographical explanation of the name derived from a village, called Khurram, but this is the least likely interpretation.

It appears that most of the followers of Khurramiya espoused ʾIsmāʿīlism in Jabal al-Badain at Azerbaijan, and asserted: "This is the true faith and we accept it."

Hasan bin Şabbāh (حسن) deputed one Dehkhoda Kaykhosrow, who had formerly belonged to the sect, to teach the Khurramiya people genuine ʾIsmāʿīlī doctrines. When he died in Muḥarram 513/May 1119, his sons ʾAbu-l-Ala and Yusūf took his place as *dāʾis* to the Khurramiya. Unfortunately both were greedy for wealth and power, and in pursuit of these, they neglected their faith in ʾIsmāʿīlism. Hasan bin Şabbāh (حسن) exhorted and warned them, but to no avail.

After Hasan aş-Şabbāh's (حسن) death in 518/1124, a weaver named Budayl arose among them and totally renounced ʾIsmāʿīlī faith. He taught his followers: "The law of the Shariʿah is only for those who keep the exterior of religion. There is no reality to what is declared lawful or forbidden in religion. Prayers and fasting must therefore be abandoned." He also taught: "Women were the water of the house. Dowry (*mahr*/مهر) and marriage contracts were unnecessary and need not be considered in marriage and, even more unimaginable, that daughters were lawful for their fathers and brothers."

Hence, they considered all forbidden things licit, and believed that the paradise and hell were on earth and that every one who recognizes the divinity of the two *dā'is* would return to earth in human shape, while those failing to do so would return in the form of wild beasts. In sum, these were the people whose doctrines consisted in rolling up the carpet of obligations of the Ṣhārī'ah, so as to render men free to follow all their pleasures and passions in permitting freedom of sexual relations and declaring as permitted all sorts of things totally prohibited by the Ṣhārī'ah.

When these became erroneously known publicly as the teachings of Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāh (حسن), the 'Ismā'ilis seized some of the heretics. The two *dā'is*, 'Abu-l-Ala and Yusūf, were apprehended on 9th Rabi' II, 537/October 31, 1142 and were scourged to death. Within a year, the rest of the heretics were searched out and executed.

It would be, therefore, absurd to believe that the doctrines of the Khurramiya sect, whose one group embraced 'Ismā'ilism and then reverted to their former cults, may be attributed to the teachings of Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāh (حسن). It is a landmark point worth consideration that the hostile aggressive sources have blindly (or maybe purposefully) mixed up the doctrines of the Khurramiya sect with the teachings of the 'Ismā'ilis with the result that their baseless and capricious narratives were popularly used to discredit the 'Ismā'ilis.



Now we come to *the* event which completely and forever took the 'Ismā'ilis out of the ambit of normative 'Islām and forever cast it in the light of heresy, apostasy, nonconformity, heterodoxy, unorthodoxy, blasphemy and nonbelief unless you happen to believe that the *bāṭin* can, in the final analysis, somehow eclipse the *ḍhahir*.

For this reason we have repeatedly referred to this Qur'ānic 'āyāt

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ
وَيَكُونَ الرِّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا ﴿١٢٤﴾

ja'alnākum 'ummatan wasaṭan li-takūnū shuhadā'a 'ala-n-nāsi
wa yakūna-r-rasūlu 'alaykum shahīdā

“We have made of you an 'ummah (community) of the center,
that you might be witnesses over the nations,
and the Messenger a witness over you.”

(Sūratu-l-Baqarah 2:143)

The distinction between the outer (*ḍahīr*) and inner (*bāṭin*) aspects of reality must *not* be understood to mean that spirituality or the esoteric is more ‘real’ than our outer concerns. Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāh ﷺ was always *very* careful to follow an ‘Islāmic “middle path”’ between the inner and the outer: a spiritual method in which all aspects of a person’s life (outer and inner, public and private, wordly and spiritual) complemented each other as a part of a single reality. Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāh ﷺ regarded, as do all true Muslims, the *ḍahīrī/bāṭinī* dichotomy as both a rhetorical device and a divine truth. ‘Islām is a way of life, in which outer practice, ‘*amal*, complements, and does not oppose, inner knowledge, ‘*ilm*, neither the one nor the other. Giving too much weight to either outer practice or inner seeking upsets the balance required for spiritual growth but this is what happened and, at least in this writer’s understanding, this was the functional end of the ‘Ismā‘ilis within normative ‘Islām.

That which began with ‘Imām Ja‘far ibn Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣādiq ﷺ conferring the the *naṣṣ* on ‘Imām ‘Ismā‘il ﷺ and in turn his conferring it on Muḥammad al-Mahdī ﷺ and down through the Fāṭimids and then to the Nizāris was fatally compromised by what follows.

I trust it can be understood by the time I have taken to dismiss the myths of rabid killers, drugs and beautiful girls in imaginary gardens that I am not opposed to ‘Ismā‘ilī thought and especially the Fāṭimī development of that thought within ‘Islām. On the contrary – but what followed after the death of Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāh ﷺ definitely compromised all that he stood for and all that he taught.



Qiyamāt-i Qubra in Alamūt

al-Qiyamātu-l-Qubra (القيامة القبر) was the event that took place in Alamūt on 17 Ramḍān, 559/August 8, 1164 when Ḥasan II came out publicly and terminated of *dawr-i-satr* (period of concealment), and announced himself to be the legitimate ‘Imām in the line of ‘Imām al-Nizār and the long hidden grandson of ‘Imām bin al-Mustanṣir and **not** the descendant of Buzurg Ummid as believed.

Without going into too much further detail, the ‘Ismā‘ilis always believed that there would come a future period or age (*dawr*/دور) called the cycle of *qiyāmat* (resurrection/قيامت), where the practice of the Shari‘ah would no longer be necessary and would be lifted by the ‘Imām of the Time and the inner/esoteric meaning of shari‘ah would be revealed publicly and then only the inner *bāṭinī* dimension of religion need be practiced, and not the outer *ḍahīrī* dimensions.

The term *qiyāmat* literally means, “the resurrection of the dead”. Allegorically, it denotes the rising of the seeker to the next spiritual stage. The *qiyāmat-i qubra* (great resurrection) means attainment to the highest degree whereby a human being becomes free from the shackles and ties of external laws and is transfigured into a purely spiritual being within the apparent form of a normal human being.

Indeed Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāh (حسن) preached the doctrine that the appearance of the °Imām az-Zamān (the leader of the time/الإمام الزمان) was imminent and that the °Imām was to be looked for. The situation of Alamūt was something wholly new, hence, the °Imām (عليه السلام) of the time *could* appear. Marshall Hodgson writes, “No doubt men hoped increasingly that the time was near when the Imām (عليه السلام) would return from his hiding, and bring his blessing among people again, as it had been among them in the days of Fāṭimid glory.”

Raṣhīdu-d-dīn writes in *Jamī‘at Tawarikh* (comp. in 310/1310) that, “On the 17th of Ramdan in the year 559, he (Ḥasan II) ordered the people in his territories [TAZ], whom he had called to be present in Alamūt at that time, to gather in the public prayer (°Eid) grounds at the foot of Alamūt castle. There they set up four large banners of four colors, white, red, yellow and green; which had been arranged for the events, at the four corners of a *mimbar* (pulpit).” °Abū Ishāq Kuhistanī also gives details in his *Haft Bab* (pp. 41-2) that, “The followers from Khorasan stood on the right, the followers from Iraq on the left, and the Daylamites with the followers from Rudhbar stood opposite. A chair was placed in the center, facing the minbar and the faqih Muḥammad Bustī was ordered to mount it. Then the Khudawand, °Ala Dhikri-hi Salām [Ḥasan II], clad in a pure white garment with a white turban on his head, descended from the fortress about noon and mounted the *mimbar* from the right, and in the most perfect manner, pronounced three times the word *salām* (سلام), – first addressing the Daylamites, then turning to the right, and then turning to the left. Then he sat for a while and then rose holding his sword...” and then, according to Jorunn J. Buckley in *The Nizari Ismailites (Studia Islāmica, Paris, 1984, LX, p. 143)*, Ḥasan II presented from the top of the pulpit a clear and eloquent address in flawless Arabic at the end of which he said;

“Oh inhabitants of the worlds – jinn, men, and angels. Know that your Mawlanā, the Lord of Resurrection (*qā’im al-qiyāmat*) is the lord of everything in existence.

“He is the lord who is the absolute being (*wujūd-i mutlāq*). He excludes all existential determinations. He transcends them all; he opens up the threshold of his Mercy; through the light of his Knowledge he causes all beings to see, hear and speak for all eternity.

“The °Imām of the Time sends you his blessings and compassion. He has called upon you to be his specially selected servants. He has relieved you of the duties and burdens of the Ṣhari°ah and has brought you to the *qiyāmah* (the resurrection).

Ḥasan II then said, “Know that this °Imāmāte is true, it will never go astray, become changed or altered. It was always preserved in the posterity of Mawlanā °Alī ؑ, and will never be dissociated from them, either in appearance, or in meaning, or reality.”

“Today *I* have explained to you the Law (*ṣhari°ah*) and its meaning. *I* free you from the rigidity of the Law and *I* resurrect you from the bondage of the letter to the freedom of the spirit of the Law. Obey me and follow me. Give up your misunderstanding and be united. Lead a virtuous life free from the fear of the Day of Judgement. Union with Allāh, in reality *is* the resurrection. Break your fast and rejoice. This is the day of utmost happiness and gratitude.”

Following this declaration, the °Imām invited everyone to break their fast (*al-°iftār/إفطار*) at midday during the month of Ramaḍān. Thereafter, this day was known as °Eid al-Qiyāmah (The Festival of Resurrection) or the Great Resurrection (*qiyāmatu-l-qubra*).

The *qiyāmah* had freed the murīds from the religious law (*ṣhari°ah*) and summoned them to the spiritual reality (*ḥaqqiqah*) of the °Imām. They were invited to a spiritual Paradise on earth and to be blessed with the luminous vision (*nūrani didar*) of the °Imām.

Ḥasan II thus abolished the Laws of Ṣhari°ah and made the Qiyama the base of Ismā°ili esoterism (*baṭiniyat*). The Declaration was followed by the ceremony of an oath of allegiance (*bay°ah*).

It is worth consideration to touch here on another key point which is that °Imām al-Ḥadī bin al-Nizār was born in Egypt in 470/1076 and his mother tongue was Arabic. His progeny and successors, al-Muḥtadī and al-Qaḥīr lived in exile in private rooms in the fortress of Lamasar which was in Iran not far from Alamut. Their mother tongue was Arabic and they spoke Arabic at home and Ḥasan II was thus brought up entirely within an Arabic domestic environment. He, as a result, naturally delivered his talks and sermons in Arabic, which is agreed upon by all the historians.

Ḥasan bin Ṣabbāḥ ﷺ, according to the above treatise had foretold the advent of *qiyāmat-i qubra*, and said, “When the *qa’im* appears, he will sacrifice a camel, and bring forth a red standard.” (p. 21). The author further writes, “And all these (signs) I have actually seen in the °Imām, °Ala Dḥikrihi Salām (على ذكره السلام). (p. 21)”

After the proclamation of the *qiyāmat*, Ḥasan II, in his letters (*fusūl*) and addresses, said that he himself was the °Imām of the Age, the son of an °Imām from the progeny of °Imām Nizār bin al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh. Writing on this, W. Ivanow says in *Alamut and Lamasar* (Tehran, 1960 p. 29) that, “It is quite possible that the period of about 75 years, from the installation of Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ in Alamūt, a period of continuous hard struggle had so much matured their spirits that they could be regarded as fit to discard the usual external forms of worship, and carry on by their internal spiritual discipline.” In sum, the *qiyāmat* was interpreted to mean that with the manifestation of the unveiled truth (*ḥaqiqqah*) in the person of the °Imām the believers were at last capable of comprehending the full Truth.”

The *qiyāmat* also represented an attempt by the °Imām to bring the Shari’ah in line with the time. The °Imām, henceforth, began to stress the spirituality and the inner meaning of the religious commandments rather the outer prescriptions.

Ten weeks later, a token ceremony of *qiyāmāt* was held at the fortress of Mu°minabad located to the east of Birjand in Kohistan on 8th Dḥu-l-Qada, 559/September 18, 1164. Ḥasan II sent his messenger, Muhammad Khaqan to Rais Muzaffar, his deputy who had headed the °Ismā°ilis of Kohistan since 555/1160. Here the written sermons of Ḥasan II were read aloud, In Syria too, the *qiyāmat* was announced, but not for a while later in 560/1165.

Immediately Ḥasan II became the absolute ruler of Alamūt and the Nizāri °Ismā°ili °Imām. The *Dawr-i Satr* (time of concealment) was replaced by the *Dawr-i Kashaf* (time of revelation). This was the second *dawr-i satr*. The first was in the pre-Fāṭmid period after the concealment of Muḥammad, son of Ismā°il ibn Ja°far as-Ṣadiq ﷺ.

According to the *Cambridge History of Iran* (London, 1968, 5th vol., p. 474), “The term *satr* (ستر) had originally referred to those periods when the whereabouts of the °Imām was unknown to the world at large, or even, at times, to the faithful, as had been the case among °Ismā°ilis for four generations before the rise of the Fāṭimids and again after the death of Nizār, the son of Mustanṣir.”

Ḥasan II was thus the son of al-Qahir bin al-Muhtadi bin al-Hadi bin Nizār. Once he was recognized as the Nizārī °Imām, the breach with the preceding period of *satr* when the °Imām was hidden from his followers and only his *hujjāt* (حجاة) Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ ﷺ, who always made it very clear that he was only ever acting on behalf of the °Imām. Alamūt, as suc, was no more. It was truly a new day.



Four years after the declaration of *qiyāmat*, on the 6th of Rabī° al-Awwal, 561/January 9, 1166, °Imām Ḥasan II (على ذكره السلام) was stabbed to death in Lamasar by his brother-in-law, Ḥasan bin Namasar, who belonged to a local Daylami branch of the Buwahid line, which had ruled in western Iran as an °Ithnā°aṣḥariyyah dynasty. Ḥasan II was succeeded by his 19 year old son, Alā Muḥammad.



At the end of this *bayān* here are a few important questions to which any believing Muslim needs to have the answers. Did the Prophet ﷺ possess an authority to revoke, substitute or abrogate permanently the Law, specially that of Hajj (3:97) and Fasting (2:183)? Could the Prophet ﷺ have authorized °Alī ؑ to do so? Does Allāh ﷻ authorize anyone to substitute, revoke or abrogate Qur°ānic Law, especially the very basics of °Islām? The text of the historical Declaration of *Qiyāmat-i Qubra* reads “*I make you free*”. Who is this “*I*”? In the end it is immaterial whether Ḥasan II made the Declaration as a descendant of Nizār or descendant of Buzurgumid. or whether he made the Declaration as an °Imām or as a representative of the hidden °Imām (as some historians seem to think), the question is *who* gave him or where did this “*I*” get the authority to set Muslims *free* from the Law of Allāh ﷻ. Anyone who blindly obeys such a Declaration and considers him/herself as a “Free Unbound Muslim” without knowing the answers to the above questions and without verifying the authority and authenticity of the “*I*” who spoke in Alamut, is certainly treading a path which could lead them to a place where no Muslim who submits to Allāh ﷻ would like to be on the Day of Judgement (*Yawmu-l-Qiyāmah*/يوم القيامة).



The rest is history
wa-llāhu °alim

Temporary Autonomous Zones of the Medieval ʾIsmāʿīlīs

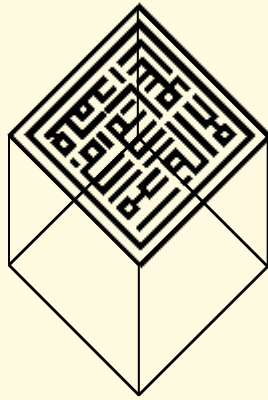


TAZ of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs in Iran and Syria



TAZ of the ʾIsmāʿīlīs in the vicinity of Rudbar and Alamut

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